

Streets We Call the Zoo by HashtagLEH

Category: Stranger Things (TV 2016)

Genre: Alternate Universe - Mob, Alternate Universe - Modern Setting, Alternate Universe - No Powers, Basketball as a way of flirting, Billy Hargrove & Maxine "Max" Mayfield Have a Good Relationship, Billy Hargrove Has a Crush on Steve Harrington, Billy has a Thing™ for Steve's Hair, Bisexual Billy Hargrove, Bisexual Steve Harrington, Bodyguard Eleven, Brotherly Steve Harrington & Dustin Henderson, Casual Sex, Competitive Homoeroticism, Declarations Of Love, Dom/sub Undertones, Enemies to Lovers, FBI Agent Jonathan Byers, FBI Agent Steve Harrington, Forehead Touching, Friends With Benefits, Good Person Billy Hargrove, Good Person Steve Harrington, Human Trafficking, Identity Porn, Implied/Referenced Child Abuse, Implied/Referenced Sex, Inappropriate Use of Falafel, Kidnapping, M/M, Misunderstandings, Mob Boss Billy Hargrove, Mob Boss Steve Harrington, Nazi imagery, Polyamorous Characters, Polyamory, Sex Work, Sort Of, Torture, Trust Issues, Unashamed Slut Billy Hargrove, Undercover Steve Harrington, You cannot tell me that the crowding is not hella gay, a smidgen of, because why not, definitely not a slow burn fic, except not really friends, in background characters

Language: English

Characters: Alexei (Stranger Things), Billy Hargrove, Carol Perkins, Dustin Henderson, Eleven | Jane Hopper, Heather Holloway, Jim "Chief" Hopper, Jonathan Byers, Kali Prasad, Lucas Sinclair, Maxine "Max" Mayfield, Mike Wheeler, Murray Bauman, Nancy Wheeler, Robin Buckley, Steve Harrington, Steve Harrington's Father, Tommy Hagan, Will Byers

Relationships: Alexei/Murray Bauman, Billy Hargrove & Maxine "Max" Mayfield, Billy Hargrove/Steve Harrington, Eleven | Jane Hopper & Kali Prasad, Maxine "Max" Mayfield/Lucas Sinclair, Other Background Relationships - Relationship, Tommy Hagan & Steve Harrington, Will Byers/Eleven | Jane Hopper/Mike Wheeler

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Summary:

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“His son hasn’t been seen yet,” Jane murmured quietly, hardly moving her lips and not letting on to anyone watching that she was speaking to him. “He’s still expected to show up though.”

Billy sighed a little at that, because this whole thing with John Harrington’s death was very fishy already, and that was before everyone found out about his mysterious son. He hadn’t appeared until after his father’s death, putting doubt in the minds of some people as to whether he was a usurper or not. Supposedly old man Harrington’s will declared his son Steven as the new head of the Harrington crime family, but Billy was holding his reservations on that until he found out more.

1. Chapter 1

Author's Note:

- Inspired by [just call me angel of the morning, baby](#) by Catharrington.

I was going to wait until I had finished writing this to post anything, but I'm weak and desire validation and cheerleading as I go. I'm about halfway through with it anyway, so I expect it will be finished within a couple of months at the latest. (Especially considering that I've only been writing this for a week and I'm so far along already.) For those of you following my other series, I haven't abandoned it - I'm just taking a little break as my motivation is *high* for this one.

ALSO this is heavily based on another mafia fic I read recently, but if I added it now it would definitely spoil the ending of this one. So after I've posted the last chapter I'll add the one that inspired this so you can all be surprised. ;)

So, I hope you enjoy!

Steve stared up at the opulent hotel. It wasn't as old as the usual ones, maybe built in the seventies rather than the twenties, but it still had that Roaring Twenties style, with the yellow-brown brick and the shining chandeliers being the lobby's source of light. It was exactly the style Steve would expect.

It was hard to get a reservation at this hotel, he remembered. It always seemed to have only one or two rooms available – they would always be snatched up within a few minutes of it becoming clear. It had only increased the demand for the rooms, as people were drawn by the allure of mystery surrounding it. It lived up to the expectations, with its grand ballroom and other state of the art facilities. People who worked there never wanted to leave their jobs; there never seemed to be any openings, either. It was an expensive

place wrapped in secrecy.

He didn't need a reservation, though. He wasn't staying the night.

Blowing out a breath, knowing that someone must have been watching him standing there for the past couple of minutes, he decided to stop stalling and make his way inside. Waiting wasn't going to change anything; he may as well get this over with. If he was going to die today, so be it.

He passed through the metal detectors – just for show, he knew, because going anywhere important would require a much more thorough search that would put the TSA to shame – and walked right past the receptionist. He could feel eyes on him as he turned the corner, going to the private hallway that guests weren't allowed near. He was a little surprised that no one stopped him before he got to the door he was aiming for.

The guard in front of the door he needed wasn't someone Steve recognized. He smiled anyway, went up to him, saying pleasantly, "I need to see him."

The guard considered him with a blank expression. "He's not in."

Steve nodded condescendingly. "Right, I'm sure," he said blandly. "If you could leave a message, just let him know that Steve brought a nice red."

The guard's eyes drifted to Steve's hands, held carefully out at his sides to show that he posed no threat, but were also certainly not holding a nice bottle of red wine. He looked back up at Steve and then said anyway, "I'll be sure to let him know."

Steve tipped his head at him in acknowledgement, and then without another word, strolled back down the hallway as though he hadn't a care in the world. As expected, he heard the quiet click of the door behind him just as he turned the corner back toward the main lobby.

He didn't wait around, walking instead past the metal detectors and out the doors once more, and then went to lean against the wall of the building, near the corner away from the doors. Propping one foot

against the wall behind him, he pulled a cigarette from his coat pocket, lighting it up in quick, easy movements. He watched the people walking on the sidewalk in front of him, picking out who was a tourist and who lived there just by virtue of how they moved. His lips turned up a little at the sight of a couple of college-aged girls wearing jackets too thin for the windy weather as they posed for a selfie.

He wasn't finished with his first cigarette before he sensed a presence at his side – a familiar one that made the corners of his mouth curl up unwillingly before he turned his head to meet slightly wary brown eyes.

“Hey, Tommy,” he greeted, as though nothing was strange about this, as though they'd only been parted for a day. He took another puff from his cigarette.

“You son of a bitch,” Tommy breathed, but the wariness was already fading from his eyes, smile growing across his freckled face. “You son of a *bitch*, I thought you were *dead*.”

“I went to *school*, Hagan,” Steve said dryly.

“Yeah, eight *fucking* years ago!” Tommy said like he was angry, but he was still grinning, and a moment later he was spreading his arms for a hug. “Come here, you sick bastard.”

Steve huffed a laugh, tossing his cigarette to the ground and hugging his best friend, not surprised in the least when he felt hands patting down his sides, checking for wires or guns. When they pulled away, Tommy shrugged at the look on Steve's face.

“I had to make sure,” he said, only semi-apologetically. “No one knows what the hell you've been up to in the time you were gone.”

Steve shrugged, because he *had* expected it. “Didn't know you'd become security, is all.”

Tommy smirked at him proudly. “I'm more than security – I'm a *bodyguard*.”

“No shit,” Steve said, a little surprised. “Thought you couldn't stand

being around the guy too long.”

Tommy shrugged. “Things change, Boy Wonder,” he said, only a little bitterness seeping into his voice. Steve bit his lip and didn’t address that – it wasn’t the time.

“I hope not *too* many things,” Steve said lightly. “How are things with Carol?”

The grin spread across Tommy’s face again, darkness being shoved away in favor of a happier subject. “Aw, we’re *engaged*, motherfucker,” he crowed. “June Seventh!”

Steve returned the grin, truly happy for his old friend. “No shit! Congrats, dude!”

“You better fucking stick around for it!” Tommy threatened good-naturedly. “It’s only a few months away!”

Steve’s grin went a little tight, as he remembered the reason he was there. “Well, that’s the hope, anyway. But I guess it depends on what Boss Man has to say, doesn’t it?”

Tommy’s smile dimmed a little as he remembered the same thing. “Eh, he’s in a better mood today. I think he might’ve actually been *happy* to hear that you’re here to see him.”

“Shit, really?” Steve said, a little surprised. He hadn’t really expected a warm welcome after the way he’d left things years ago – had expected to be turned away, maybe have to return a few times or do something to prove himself.

“Yeah man, he was *pissed* when you left last time,” Tommy revealed. “I mean, I’m sure you expected that – you gave a very solid ‘fuck you’ when you went to college to major in *Art* rather than joining him.” He grimaced when he talked about school, and Steve didn’t bother trying to defend his choices because it was years ago anyway and there was nothing that could’ve been done about it now.

“And then you totally cut off all contact,” Tommy went on. “I think *everyone* just thought you were dead because he just stopped talking about you altogether. He shot anyone who brought you up in

conversation or even in passing – it was a bit of a nightmare. He even fired Allred because his first name was Stephen.” Then he grinned a little. “Well, that last one might not be true, but that’s the rumor, anyway.”

“And you really think he’s *happy* to see me after all of that?” Steve questioned, nervousness sitting in his gut like a stone. He wasn’t totally sure he was making it back out of the hotel, once he went in, despite what Tommy told him.

“Oh, yeah, man,” Tommy agreed, nodding his head emphatically. “Why else would he send *me* down to check that it’s not some fucker come to play with him? He knows there’s no risk of *me* hurting you.”

“So...when should I come back?” Steve questioned, shoving his hands in his pockets to ward against the chilly wind and trying to ignore the way his friend’s eyes tracked the movement carefully, making sure he wasn’t reaching for some kind of weapon. “I mean, does he want to set up a better time, or...?”

Tommy looked at him disbelievingly. “Did you not hear what I said?” he demanded, huffing an incredulous laugh. “He *missed* you, Steve-O. He’s waiting for you upstairs.”

“Oh,” Steve said, surprised but not displeased by this turn of events. “Lead the way then, I guess.”

They returned to the interior of the hotel, safe from the cold outside, and as they approached the door Steve had talked with the guard at before, Tommy’s demeanor changed, becoming less his friend and more like the dangerous bodyguard he was. Steve watched him give a single nod to the lower-level guard with a blank expression, and realized suddenly when he noticed how straight his own back was that just as Tommy was slipping into his own second skin, Steve was doing the same, becoming the boy he had been years ago, the one who couldn’t let anyone else see him sweat. He hadn’t realized that he still remembered those things; he wasn’t sure how he felt about it.

The small room on the other side of the door had more security, more people Steve didn’t recognize, because they were protecting the single private elevator – the one only a select few were allowed to

board. Steve knew that it led to only one location.

The security patted Steve down much more thoroughly than Tommy had, moving their hands down legs and arms in a way that Steve had seen done to dozens of people in the past, but had never had done to him. It was a strange experience, to be on the other side of things. He knew though that, considering the history, it was a deserved distance, an understandable precaution.

“He’s clean,” one of them reported to Tommy after taking his watch, cell phone, and lighter to be returned later, the handheld metal detectors not picking up anything else. Tommy nodded, and Steve thought the redhead might have been a bit impatient, but after so long apart it was hard to tell what the other man was thinking anymore with any sort of certainty. He had gotten much better at hiding his facial expressions in their time apart.

The ride up to the penthouse was done in silence; Steve supposed that someone must be watching the camera in the elevator and was careful to keep his expression placid, not letting on how the butterflies in his stomach must have been doing acrobatics, heart caught in his throat. He knew Tommy said he would be fine, but Steve couldn’t help the worry that this wasn’t going to work.

The elevator doors opened soundlessly, without even a ding to announce their arrival – not that it was needed. Everyone on the other side had expected his coming.

He submitted to another pat-down by the security outside the doors; these were the higher-ups, and he recognized a couple of faces among them – Damien, and Lauren, and Thomas – but he didn’t look at them, instead keeping his gaze fixed on the man sitting at the desk on the far side of the room, taking him in as much as he was being examined.

He didn’t look that much older – a little more grey around the temples, a few more lines on his face like he’d spent the eight years they were apart frowning the entire time. His hands were folded in front of him on the desk, fingers laced together and the large ring on his finger glinting in the light from the chandelier. Steve remembered how he used to try on that ring, when he was allowed. He met the

man's eyes, the blue looking guarded but – Steve wanted to believe – hopeful.

After a few moments, the woman patting him down stepped back, giving a wordless nod to the man at the desk. His expression didn't change as he rose to his feet, walking around the desk and approaching Steve. Steve resisted the urge to swallow, knowing that it would be noticed, and remained silent as the distance between them shortened until they were only a little more than a foot apart. Steve vaguely noted that he was the taller of the two now, by about an inch. He had always been shorter – it was only more proof of how things had changed. And how much had stayed the same.

Those blue eyes were just watching him, waiting, expectant, and Steve should have expected that, because the mafia boss was good at that, at waiting him out until he dug his own hole, but still he was a little surprised. It really had been a long time.

But he knew that he needed to say something, to be the one to break the silence, and it was easy after all to fall into his old role as he said, "Dad." His voice broke a little, and he didn't clear his throat because that would be admitting to weakness and that was not the Harrington way, so he just firmed his voice and said the words he needed to, the words his father needed to hear: "I'm sorry."

The senior Harrington regarded Steve with a blank expression for only a moment more, before his face creased into a smile – relief and satisfaction and smug superiority there in equal measure. He was the one to meet Steve halfway, returning his words with a hug, arms around his shoulders.

"You are forgiven, son," he told him, the first words Steve had heard from him in eight years, and his heart galloped in his chest as he returned the hug. "Welcome home."

Four Years Later

Billy's eyes tracked over the assembled guests, taking in faces and

identifying them by their names and their duties. Some faces he didn't know the names of, but he had seen them enough times as security that he wasn't alarmed by their presence. Others he knew as "maids" or "cooks" at the hotels, who just so happened to have jobs with the catering company or other staff here.

Someone sidled up next to him, and he didn't turn to look at her, knowing enough by familiar scented perfume and the flash of red hair out the corner of his eye who it was.

"Stop frowning," Max hissed out the corner of her mouth, watching all the people milling about in a much more relaxed way than he. "You're going to freak people out."

Billy frowned deeper at her, just to be contrary. "It's a fucking funeral, Maxine – am I supposed to *smile*?"

Max refrained from rolling her eyes, and only because she knew people would see. "No, but stop scowling and checking over everyone. We're here to be *supportive*, not keep tabs on the Harrington family."

"At least visibly," Billy said under his breath, and Jane gave him a little judging side-eye, clearly hearing him.

"Stop it," Max whispered harshly. "Start talking to people – we may not have another chance to see so many of Harrington's people in one place."

"His son hasn't been seen yet," Jane murmured quietly, hardly moving her lips and not letting on to anyone watching that she was speaking to him. "He's still expected to show up though."

Billy sighed a little at that, because this whole thing with John Harrington's death was very fishy already, and that was before everyone found out about his mysterious son. He hadn't appeared until after his father's death, putting doubt in the minds of some people as to whether he was a usurper or not. Supposedly old man Harrington's will declared his son Steven as the new head of the Harrington crime family, but Billy was holding his reservations on that until he found out more.

“Why the hell would someone like that just appear out of the blue?” Billy had demanded when he’d heard the news a few days beforehand.

“The greater question,” Max had pointed out in response, “Why are Harrington’s people totally okay with it? Why didn’t we know that Harrington had a son before now?”

“He could be here without making a big deal of it,” Max suggested now. “Which is why you need to stop being standoffish, Bills. Go. Mingle.”

“Fine,” he said with a little sigh. “If anyone figures out who this Harrington heir is, give me the signal.”

Max nodded once, waving him off, Jane following at his heels, a silently threatening presence to anyone who might approach him without warning.

He met a few people, some of the extended Harrington family who bore faint resemblances to the man Billy had met just a couple of times. They didn’t exactly sneer at him when they found out that he was head of the Hargrove family, but they weren’t really warm with him either. Billy hadn’t expected that anyway, so it was whatever – the Hargrove and Harrington families had only been in the beginning talks of an alliance, so he didn’t expect that many people would know about it, anyway. He only hoped that the Harrington heir was updated on everything and would be as willing as his father seemed to be in creating this alliance. There was too much at stake to allow the growing relationship to fizzle into nothing. Billy completely expected the heir to be some snot-nosed teenager, and he was already groaning at the thought of dealing with someone who was one hundred percent certain that their way was best. It would be *insufferable*.

He took a break from talking to people to examine the tables of food, laid out buffet style with waiters occasionally coming to replace the plates of finger food. He picked up what looked like a small sandwich skewered through with a toothpick, popping it into his mouth and chewing once before he winced and grabbed a glass of champagne from a passing waiter. He washed down the sandwich that had way

too much garlic on it with the much more pleasing taste of bubbly, deciding he'd grab a burger from a fast food place later on rather than risk more of the finger foods.

"Well, I guess I know what to stay away from," an amused voice said from a little ways away. Billy coughed a little and looked over to the other man, who was leaned slightly over the plate of what looked like melon pieces. He was on the other side of the table, where only the workers had been before, but unlike the workers he was dressed in a suit that made him look more official. He cocked his eyebrow at him, and Billy thought immediately that the other man was unfairly attractive.

"There's enough garlic in those things to kill a vampire," Billy said automatically, and then winced mentally, because this was exactly why Neil had doubted his abilities to lead, had tried beating into him the importance of speaking only when necessary, of not saying anything that might make someone else think they could take advantage.

The other man only laughed though, and Billy relaxed a little, covering with, "I think the fruit should be fine." The other man, who was probably around Billy's age, hummed consideringly and picked up a honeydew piece, and Billy sipped the last of his champagne, trying not to notice how the other man's lips wrapped around the melon in an absolutely *sinful* way.

He set the empty glass on the table, in favor of picking up one of the meatballs. "I don't recognize you," Billy said casually. "You work for Harrington, pretty boy?"

The other man choked a little on his melon as he swallowed, and flicked his eyes over to Billy. "Sort of," he said vaguely, glancing around the room for a moment, but Billy was too caught up in the way the man's long fingers played with his empty toothpick to notice. Billy could see the underside of a ring on the middle finger of his right hand; it only accentuated the gracefulness of the rest of his fingers. He coughed a little and finally put the meatball he was holding into his mouth. Thankfully, this food didn't have as much garlic in it, so he grabbed another one even while he was still chewing on the first.

“Meatballs are safe,” he reported to the other man, feeling a little antsy. He wanted to talk to him more, but he also didn’t really know *how* to make normal conversation, especially with someone so attractive. He tried to remember that he was supposed to be finding the Harrington heir, that he needed to stop thinking with his dick and do his job, but in the face of those captivating brown eyes that was hard to do.

“Thank god,” the other man breathed at Billy’s words, walking down the length of the table to reach the meatballs in front of Billy. “I’m starving.”

“So,” Billy said, trying to get his brain back into gear. “You have any idea when the Harrington heir is going to make an appearance? Or is he not showing up today?”

The man choked on his meatball, and Billy had the vague thought that he’d choked twice now, and it still wasn’t on anything of *value*, before he pushed the horny thought away, because it was *not* the time.

“It is his *father’s* funeral,” the man said with a raised eyebrow after his airway was cleared again.

Billy shrugged at that though. “My old man was a mean son of a bitch – I would’ve avoided his funeral if *I* could’ve. I don’t know what Harrington Senior might’ve been like to *his* kid.”

The other eyebrow raised to join the first. “That’s a pretty awful thing to say at the guy’s own funeral,” he said evenly. Billy’s heart kicked in a slight panic at the look on the guy’s face, because he was pretty sure he had just fucked up there, and he didn’t want the guy to go to his boss and have one stupid comment fuck up the growing alliance.

“Shit, don’t worry about it,” he said, acting like it wasn’t a big deal, trying to project ease to trick the other guy into thinking it wasn’t a big deal too. “I don’t mean anything by it. Just wanting to see the guy I only found out about less than a week ago.”

“Because you’re trying to build an alliance between your family and Harrington’s,” the guy deduced quickly, eyes still watching him

carefully – just a bit too shrewd for his otherwise cheerful persona.

Billy was surprised that the guy apparently knew who he was, and he had the brief thought that perhaps this man was higher on the food chain than he had originally thought. He was probably one of the head bodyguards, or even a public face to judge everyone else and report back to the head with advice. He kept this carefully in mind, because he might be in the middle of an evaluation. He didn't let on that he was surprised by the guy's deduction, only shrugging with one shoulder and saying, "I'm amenable to it. I'm curious if he would be, too. Don't want to assume he's too much like his father, after all." He threw in a grin and a quick wink, softening his previous words against the late Harrington. "There's enough chatter with the Russian families that there's reason to be nervous about a takeover."

The guy hummed and popped another meatball into his mouth. "I'll see what we can do," he said after swallowing, and grinned back at Billy, smile a little crooked in a way that Billy told himself did *not* make his heart flutter. It was nervousness that he'd offended the guy with talk of Harrington Senior possibly being a piece of shit – that was all.

At that moment a familiar man with red-brown hair approached the guy from behind – familiar because Billy had seen him as the head bodyguard for Harrington Senior before, when he'd gone to meet him as they'd talked about their areas under the guise of casual discussion and not interviewing each other to see if the other would be a good ally. Billy was pretty sure his name was something basic like Tim or Tom – if that was even his real name – and he had always stood within a few feet of the elder Harrington, constantly watching for threats. It was strange, to see him alone now.

He supposed for a brief moment that the attractive man he'd been talking to must be another part of the security detail, considering the fact that the head bodyguard was talking to him, but then Billy took in their attitudes with each other, and the theory didn't make sense.

The auburn-haired man had leaned in close to the other man, head turned so that no one could try to read his lips while he spoke quietly, directly into the brunette's ear. His posture was deferential, almost, but with an easy familiarity that said he was fine and

comfortable getting so close to the other. The brunette nodded once to whatever the bodyguard was saying, expression closed off in a way Billy saw sometimes in the mirror, and his hand touched the bodyguard's elbow while he responded just as quietly, something hard appearing in his expression as he turned his head away also. Billy blinked, the food he'd eaten sitting like lead in his stomach, because he suddenly understood that it hadn't been a Harrington *underling* he'd been talking to, as he'd thought.

He knew what a mafia boss looked like when they were directing an order at someone.

The two looked back at Billy a moment later, and Steven Harrington – because that's who it was, *obviously*, Billy should've known because he'd seen pictures of John Harrington when he was young and the resemblance was uncanny – Harrington *smiled* at him, not even looking smug or dismissive or scathing or anything but *genuine*, which made Billy nervous more than any other reaction would've because surely Harrington wasn't pleased to hear badmouthing against his *father* and so he must be even better at hiding his true feelings than anyone Billy had ever seen.

"I'm Steve," he finally introduced himself, clearly seeing that Billy had figured out who he was – Billy didn't want to imagine what his expression must have looked like. "I'd be interested in more discussion on this topic, Mr. Hargrove – shall we set up a time to meet?" He waved his hand out to his side, wordlessly calling someone over without looking, and a moment later a woman with red-blond hair appeared at his side. "Carol can hammer out more details with your people."

Billy nodded, remembering his manners and public face a moment later and smiling at Harrington as though he *hadn't* been smacked in the face with this revelation. "Pleasure meeting you," he said smoothly, wanting to punch those eyes a little that were dancing with laughter at his scrambling, because the guy could've *told* him who he was before he stuck his foot in it.

Harrington nodded at him in acknowledgement, before turning away and walking with his bodyguard to some other part of the hotel. Billy turned and caught Jane's eye, who had been standing just far enough

away to have not heard his conversation with the Harrington heir, and waved her over so that she could talk with this Carol about setting up a time they could meet more officially. For a moment he wanted to be angry that she'd kept her distance this time, because she could've kept him from making a fool of himself, but he squashed the desire a moment later because that wouldn't be fair. Jane was his bodyguard, not his minder.

Max was never going to let him live this down – which was understandable, because he *should've* known better than to let his guard down for even a moment. He'd always had a weakness for pretty boys, though.

2. Chapter 2

Summary for the Chapter:

“Stop fidgeting,” Jane told him calmly as the car pulled up to the curb, as though he wasn’t her boss but an antsy little brother. He glared a little as she continued, unfazed, “It shows you’re uncertain.”

“Don’t give Harrington anything to abuse,” Max agreed, sending off a text on her phone before pocketing the device. “You ready?”

Billy sniffed imperiously. “Of course.”

It was five days later that Billy sat in the back of the car, his fingers tapping against his knee while his driver navigated the Chicago streets to the meeting place. He hadn’t honestly expected to be able to meet Harrington so soon, but he supposed the guy was just as eager as he to figure out an alliance before the Russians gained more traction. Either that or he was going to threaten him and didn’t want to waste time. Billy wasn’t totally sure what to expect of this meeting – not after he’d so thoroughly flubbed the first one.

As expected, Max had been as upset as she was incredulous at Billy’s actions when he’d updated her after the funeral what had gone on. He’d had the time to reflect on everything that had gone down between them, all the little things that he hadn’t thought were particularly important at the time. Even the ring that Harrington had been wearing – he now realized that it had been the Harrington signet, and couldn’t believe that he hadn’t thought of or noticed that, but had instead focused on how pretty it made his hands look. He himself wore the Hargrove signet – he had no excuse to have just passed over that, especially when he’d been actively looking for the Harrington heir and didn’t know what he looked like. He should’ve been more vigilant, as Max liked to frequently remind him every chance she got.

It also made sense how Harrington had recognized him – not just by the signet, but by virtue of the fact that Billy had been head of the

Hargrove family for a little over five years now, so someone being raised to be head of the Harrington family would have been expected to know these things as a part of his training. Billy well remembered the flash cards that he'd had to study as a teenager, keeping himself up to date on the heads of families and their immediate successors and other people of import in each family – their allies and their enemies alike. He was sure that, however long this Steve Harrington had been there – which couldn't have been too long could it, since he hadn't even known he *existed*, and surely secrets couldn't be well kept for *that* long – he would have been expected to know these things as well.

"Stop fidgeting," Jane told him calmly as the car pulled up to the curb, as though he wasn't her boss but an antsy little brother. He glared a little as she continued, unfazed, "It shows you're uncertain."

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Jane stepped out of the car first, eyes carefully taking in the people outside the pizza parlor that the meeting was set up at. Kali was already at the doors, opposite a young man of Harrington's that Billy was pretty sure was named Mike. (Maybe Nick – something like that. He was newer, so Billy wasn't as sure on that one.) It was only a moment before Jane was stepping aside at Kali's quick nod of approval, her sister's reassurance that all was well so far being enough for her.

Billy got out of the car, Max following just behind him, and without pause and with a confidence he didn't feel, he walked through the doors into the pizza parlor, trusting that his security was already inside, alongside Harrington's own security. Upon entering, he discovered that both sides were evenly matched, a dozen people on each side guarding their bosses from the other. He made a mental note to give Jane a bonus, as she had no doubt included this detail in their arrangements to meet.

Harrington was sitting not quite at the back, but it was clearly the best strategic location in case of intrusion, far from the front door but

also turned toward the back that led to the kitchen, so that he and his guards could see anyone coming. He sat angled so that his profile was toward the front, and Billy began breathing a bit easier at that, because that was a sign that he wanted to be equal with Billy – he wasn't making the immediate announcement that he distrusted him by forcing Billy to keep his back to the front of the parlor. Perhaps Billy hadn't *completely* screwed things up at the funeral.

The parlor was empty of any other customers, completely taken over by the Harringtons and Hargroves, and Billy wondered who was cooking the food, whether they were being paid extra or whether they were someone under Harrington. They were in neutral territory, as per the arrangement, but it wouldn't be unreasonable to assume that the workers had some sort of ties to either family. He pushed it out of his mind a moment later though, trusting that Jane would have dealt with the logistics of that.

Harrington looked up at him when he approached, meeting his eyes easily, and a pleased smile crossed his face as he waved his hand in an invitation for Billy to sit. Billy accepted, Max and Jane immediately settling into spots behind him at either shoulder, far enough not to crowd him but close enough to pull him out if anything happened. Harrington's people – Tommy and Carol (Billy had studied since the funeral to brush up on knowledge, so he could say their names with certainty now) – mirrored them behind their own boss.

"Thanks for coming," Harrington said, his expression even but with an odd sort of warmth in his eyes that Billy wouldn't expect in another mafia boss. "My dad used to take me here as a kid when I'd get good grades – I missed Chicago pizza a *lot* when I was in New York. They just don't do it the same."

Billy was surprised by this information – and not just the content of it, but the fact that Harrington had felt so comfortable sharing it so immediately. Then he was suspicious, because *why* was he sharing information like this?

But he played along, acting like the information was nothing as he said, "Since you're familiar with it then, which would you recommend?"

"I'm pretty partial to the meat lovers," Harrington admitted. "But sometimes I like veggies on it – Mom's voice in my head telling me it'll make me big and strong, I guess."

Billy smirked a little, and without thinking said, "You look 'big and strong' enough to me." He heard Max cough pointedly behind him and his smirk vanished as he remembered himself, where he was and what he was trying to accomplish here, and it wasn't getting in the other guy's pants. "Er – sorry. Meat lovers sounds fine."

But Harrington laughed, eyes warming a little more as he reached out to take a drink from his glass of ice water. He made a small gesture with his fingers toward Carol, who muttered quiet Italian words to the dark-skinned young man at her side. The man moved silently toward the kitchen, and Billy looked back at Harrington.

"So, why were you in New York?" he questioned, because it didn't make a whole lot of sense. Wouldn't Harrington Senior have kept him in Chicago, training his son up to take over the family once he'd died? The way Harrington spoke made it sound like he'd lived there for some stretch of time.

Harrington waved a little behind him, and Billy noticed belatedly that Tommy had stepped forward, an expression on his face that spoke of something like dark intent, like he was going to stop Billy from asking the question he'd just voiced. It only made him more curious to know the answer.

"People are going to find out eventually," Harrington said with pursed lips. He sighed a little. "When I was seventeen I decided I didn't want to be a part of the family business. I went to NYU, studied art, cut ties with everyone here. I came back about four years ago – prodigal son returned, and all that. And now here I am." He spread his hands a little, as though his explanation was more than enough to satisfy Billy's curiosity.

It didn't, but he also didn't really know the guy enough that he was confident that pressing for more wouldn't get him killed or at the very least kicked out of all possibility of an alliance with him, so he didn't question him further. He *was* curious to know though why John Harrington would still continue to keep his son a secret even

after his return – and that was just one of many questions he had regarding the matter. But he kept himself silent this time, because contrary to every other time he'd opened his mouth around the man, he *did* know how to act like an actual professional mafia boss.

The pizza arrived then anyway, and Billy supposed that they must have already been making Harrington's apparently preferred pizza before Billy had arrived, because that had been unnaturally fast. He waited for Harrington to take a slice and bite into it before he took his own, eating more for the sake of appearances than because he was hungry or cared at all for the food. He couldn't even *remember* the last time he'd eaten pizza – it wasn't his go-to cheat food.

"So," Harrington said after swallowing his bite of pizza, dabbing at the corners of his mouth with his napkin despite the fact that he hadn't even gotten sauce on them. "You wanted to talk alliances. I wasn't aware that the Russians were planning any kind of takeover – who's to say you're not the one I should be wary of?"

Billy had expected this, and he had his answer ready, quickly swallowing so he could respond. "They've been bringing the Chinese to their side in recent months – there's already been tension between those two, but with the disappearances from both sides it's been getting worse. Last month Chicago PD found the body of a known runner for the Russians – in Chinese territory. It looks like the Chinese are already aware of the problem, but since they keep to themselves it hasn't been made widely known."

"What do the Poles have to say about this?" Harrington questioned, taking another bite of his pizza. "Usually they're on top of these things."

"We're Germans – they don't want to talk to us," Billy said dryly.

Harrington hummed thoughtfully at this. "Understandably," he murmured, almost absently.

"As I'm sure you know, the Poles are the most powerful mafia in Chicago," Billy reminded him. "They haven't been as resistant to the Russians in the past as they have been to the Germans. The Ukrainians will always be anti-Russian, but we don't want to create

an alliance with them, because...”

“Then the Poles would probably join the Russians out of spite,” Harrington finished with an understanding nod.

“The Russians want to take over Chicago completely, but I’m sure they would leave the Poles alone until Jasinski kicked it and then step in as de facto leader before his son could step in,” Billy said. “In any case, our own families would be fucked.”

Harrington hummed again, looking thoughtful as he set his half-eaten pizza down on his plate and wiped his fingers one-by-one on his cloth napkin. Billy forced himself not to stare at those fingers, to think about how else they could be used, and looked at the signet ring glinting in the light to remind himself to keep focused on the matter at hand.

“Why did my father have reservations on this?” Harrington asked him, regarding him carefully as he took another drink from his glass.

Billy had been dreading just this question, because he had met with the elder Harrington twice and not come to an agreement, and Harrington Junior was certainly aware of that. He wasn’t sure how Harrington would take his reply either, but he had also expected to have to answer it at some point in this meeting, so he responded readily.

“I mentioned my father last time we spoke,” he said evenly, resisting the urge to fidget once again, because he always got nervous when he had to talk of his late father with any kind of sincerity, or with anything that had a personal connotation. “He was – outdated, shall we say. I believe your father was concerned that I may be a copy of him; I wouldn’t blame him not wanting to work with someone like that. We met so that I could show him I was different.”

Harrington’s expression gave nothing away as he gazed at him over the top of his glass. Billy took a bite of his pizza, more for something to do to show that he wasn’t actually nervous than because he truly wanted the food.

“And are you?” Harrington asked him placidly after a long pause.

“Different?”

Billy swallowed his food. “I try to be. I don’t hire only WASPs, and the women are there to do their jobs, not to be my plaything.”

Harrington raised an eyebrow at that, and Billy couldn’t tell whether he was skeptical or impressed, because with a statement like that it could really go either way. He fought not to react, because he was pretty sure that Harrington was trying to get a rise out of him, to get a feel for whether he could keep a level head at the prodding. Billy had honestly expected as much, so the questions didn’t piss him off so much. That could also have to do with the fact that while Harrington was pushing for answers, he didn’t do it in a condescending way or like he expected Billy to fail – he was genuinely asking, to an extent.

“You are unmarried, with no kids,” Harrington said then. “And you have no siblings. Who is going to take up the family head when you’re gone?”

Billy was startled a little by this question, because he thought that the fact that Max was his half sister was an open secret by now – or even step sister, dependent on the rumors one listened to. Sure, he hadn’t grown up with her, and she carried her mom’s last name, but she had been a part of the Hargrove family since he was sixteen – she was a sibling like any other, so there shouldn’t have been a reason for Harrington to say he had no siblings.

He understood then though, as he rewound the conversation in his head a little bit, remembering that before Harrington’s question he had commented on the jobs of the women in his family. Perhaps his question wasn’t so out of the blue as he had first thought.

“My sister,” he told Harrington after the brief pause where his thoughts had cycled through his head. He gestured to Max, over his right shoulder, and Harrington’s eyes flicked up to her before looking back down to Billy. “As of now. I don’t plan on dying any time soon, or giving up the seat, but she’s the plan if anything happens.”

“And you don’t intend to marry, have kids to pass it on to?” Harrington questioned, tilting his head considerably.

Billy raised an eyebrow at that question; it was a bit *too* invasive for the purposes of this conversation – not to mention the fact that they barely knew each other. “Do *you*?”

Harrington tilted his head the other way at the wordless, mild reprimand Billy gave. He didn’t answer either, only giving a hum that made Billy start to honestly wonder what his answer might be to his own question. But he looked satisfied at Billy’s plan to have Max be the head of the family – it wasn’t too common to have a woman as its head, and Billy hadn’t been sure how progressive the Harrington heir would be either, but it looked like he would have no problems there – it may even help him more than it had with Harrington Senior.

“The families you’ve mentioned thus far,” Harrington said then, reaching for his pizza again, “Are they the only ones who have taken a clear stance?”

Billy opened his mouth to respond, but before he could get a word out, a shattering of glass startled him and everyone else in the room, and he was on his feet in a moment, eyes turned to the front window as gunshots rang out from the street.

He didn’t pause to investigate, because that could get him killed, and before all the glass from the window had fallen to the ground his gun was in his hands, safety off and pointed steadily at Harrington’s chest even as at the same time he stared down the barrel of Harrington’s own gun. Harrington’s guards had their guns pointed at Billy’s, the even numbers creating a standoff as they waited for their bosses to come to a conclusion and give them specific direction.

“Call your men off or I put a bullet through you,” Billy said coldly, trusting his own security to take care of the threat outside and ignoring the shouting from the street, not moving even as he heard the dull *thunk* of a bullet landing in the wood of the booth on the other side of him.

“Call off yours first!” Harrington retorted, eyes flinty and aim steady.

“I’m not the one who decided to double-cross the arrangement to meet,” Billy snarled. “Real nice, show your new power and squash any rebellion by killing off the first family head to offer you an

alliance.”

Harrington’s mouth dropped open a little, looking offended, which Billy didn’t trust at all. “You think it’s *my* men shooting outside?”

“I never had problems meeting up with your dad, but at my first meeting with you I have bullets flying at me?” Billy snorted, tightening his grip on his gun.

“And I’m the new head that no one knew about till my dad was dead,” Harrington curled his lip. “Pretty easy coup, killing someone that few have loyalty to yet.”

Billy tilted his head a little, because that *was* a pretty well-reasoned argument, and it let on more about the young Harrington than he’d probably intended – he was smarter than he pretended to be, which could be dangerous but could also be an asset.

And, considering the fact that Billy needed Harrington’s alliance to have any hope against the rising Russian family, he decided to give the man the benefit of the doubt, and conceded. He was the first to drop his gun – not putting it away, but relaxing his grip on it and no longer pointing it at the other family head.

It was just as Harrington was dropping his gun to his side, everyone else following their bosses’ leads and lowering their own weapons from where they’d pointed at each other, that the undamaged front door flew open, and the security on both sides was swinging their weapons to point at the newcomers, all on edge after the shooting and the standoff.

But it was Kali coming in, with her arm around Harrington’s guard – Mike, Billy remembered – and the younger man’s arm slung over her shoulder as she supported him inside. He was bleeding from a hole in his thigh, grimacing with each movement even as his free hand held a phone up to his ear.

“Russians,” she reported, eyes finding Billy’s immediately as she delivered the news. “One in a car, one across the street. The one in the car got away.” She nodded to the boy she supported at her side. “I dodged, newbie didn’t. He’s on the phone with a doctor on his way

here.”

“I’m not a newbie,” Mike griped, turned away from the phone for a moment to bitch at her. She didn’t respond, didn’t even roll her eyes – just kept her gaze focused on Billy for direction.

“Sit him at a booth until a doctor can come,” Billy ordered. “Axel, get the Russian off the street. Jane, call Murray...” He stopped when he turned to the girl, seeing her white expression, at the hand she had clutched to her arm, at the blood flowing out underneath it, at Max’s hand of support on the shoulder of her uninjured side.

“Fuck,” he hissed, anger lighting up within him at the sight of the injured smaller girl. He ignored the voice in his head reminding him that it was a hazard of the job, that Jane had known what she was getting into when she’d taken on the job of his head bodyguard. He hadn’t seen her with a gunshot wound before – it was very different to know something was a possibility and then another to actually see it happen. His usual calm demeanor, the one that allowed him to lead those under him, was flying out the window at the sight of a bloodied and injured Jane.

“Robin, call Dottie, get her down here,” he told his head of security.

“Doc’s on maternity leave,” Robin reminded him quietly.

“Shit – what’s her temp’s name?” Billy said, rubbing a hand down his jaw. “Suzie?”

“Myers can check over Jane too,” Harrington volunteered before Robin could respond, something odd in his expression that Billy couldn’t quite decipher as his eyes considered him carefully.

“It’s really just a graze,” Jane said, voice calm despite her pale expression. “I could probably do the stitches myself.”

“Like *hell*,” Kali said immediately, and Billy didn’t bother reprimanding her for speaking out of turn, especially in front of the Italians, because he was about to say the same thing.

But – “We really don’t need one of *yours* checking over one of *ours*,” he told Harrington, barely holding back a sneer, because while he *did*

want an alliance with the Italians, he was on edge enough after the shooting that he wanted to just pull all of his people out to make sure they were all safe.

Which reminded him – “Hey, are any of the rest of you fuckers hiding any wounds?” he called to his assembled people.

Immediately they were shaking their heads, a ring of, “No, Sir,” and, “I’m good, Boss,” echoing around the room from each of them.

The door opened then, a slight young man with a truly unfortunate haircut stumbling his way inside, and he ignored the weapons pointed at him by Billy’s people, making an immediate beeline for the young man in the booth. Billy gestured to his people to lower their weapons, because this was clearly Harrington’s doctor, Myers, and he was obviously able to pick out Mike immediately from a crowd.

“Idiot,” Billy heard the doctor muttering under his breath even as he opened his bag and removed instruments with quick, jerking movements. “So fucking stupid.”

Mike was looking at the doctor kneeling in front of him with an expression so fond Billy could feel his heart make an appearance in his throat, and he looked away, finally tucking his gun back into his waistband and going for Jane.

“I really am okay,” Jane told him when he was close enough that she could speak without being overheard. Billy vaguely noted Harrington speaking in Italian to someone behind him, was pretty sure that if he wasn’t so on edge with the recent events that it would’ve made his pants tighten, but now he just shook his head to himself and focused on the blood spilling from Jane’s arm.

“We’ll let the doc be the judge of that,” Billy said gruffly, switching to German so that none in the other family could pick up his concerns. He grabbed the cloth napkin off the table, the one he hadn’t used while eating, and pressed it to Jane’s arm to replace the one Max had given her earlier, which was now almost soaked through. “Sit down, we don’t need you passing out from blood loss.”

Jane obeyed, and Billy wasn’t sure whether it was because she was

feeling actually lightheaded or if she was just placating him, but he supposed it didn't matter because she was doing what she was told either way and that was enough. He looked up at Max, an order on his lips, but she was already looking at him with a pointed expression, and when she caught his gaze she flicked her eyes demonstratively behind him.

He resisted the urge to whirl around, to go on the defensive, because Max's firearm was still calmly at her side and she didn't look alarmed, so she probably just wanted to direct his attention to something and there was no reason for him to point a weapon at someone. So he turned, calmly, seeing Harrington approaching with hands slightly raised to show that he meant no harm, but really it was the fact that his gun had been left on the table rather than reholstered that conveyed this better, and Billy felt his hackles begin to lower.

"Myers is going to help Jane when he's done with Mike," Harrington told him, expression relaxed. Billy was preparing to spit back a retort to tell him exactly what he thought of another family's doctor helping one of his own, but Harrington continued before he could. "I figure since our families are allies now, our people can help each other, yeah?"

Billy snapped his mouth shut, because after the shit show of the shootout, he hadn't known where their families stood, or how the Italians might react, and this result was better than he might have hoped for. He wished that the alliance didn't have to happen at the cost of injuries, but if that was the price then so be it. If he fucked this up now, Max or Jane might *actually* kill him.

So, he allowed an easy smile to cross his face, offering his hand out to shake, which the other man did readily, matching his smile with one of his own. "It's much appreciated," Billy told him, releasing his hand.

"Looking forward to working with you," Harrington said lightly, before nodding to his people and making his exit. The only people with Harrington's family left behind were Myers, Mike, and Carol – Billy understood immediately the wordless, almost challenging sort of trust that Harrington was bestowing on his side with the action – like

he was daring Billy to try to hurt his people while he was gone.

But Billy had no intention of doing that. He'd gotten exactly what he wanted with this alliance.

Myers came over after the people on his side had left, clutching his bag at his side and looking a lot more uncertain than he had upon his entrance, when he'd gone to help Mike. Billy wasn't sure whether it was because the kid was nervous around strangers, or around the Hargrove family specifically, but when he looked at him questioningly, like he was asking for permission to approach one of his people to help, Billy inclined his head a little, stepping to the side to make way for the doctor to go through to get to Jane.

He heard Myers let out a quiet breath when he saw the girl behind him, and looked over in faint alarm, thinking something was more serious than he'd thought, only to see Myers staring with wide eyes at Jane.

"You're – really pretty," Myers breathed, and Billy turned away, coughing to cover a snort. He looked at Kali, standing by the booth equidistant from Mike and from Jane, and at Axel, standing casually over the body of the dead Russian and looking bored, like he wanted a cigarette.

"You two – deal with this, clean up the mess," he directed, a request as much as it was a demand. Kali and Axel both nodded immediately, and Billy gave Max a single nod, a wordless direction to watch Jane until she could make it safely back. She blinked at him once, an equally wordless agreement.

Having no other reason to stay, Billy turned, and left with his security.

"It didn't go as expected, but we did get what we wanted," Max said later that night, tapping on her phone while she sat sideways in the plush chair, legs draped over one arm of it. She wasn't dressed in the usual boots and leather jacket, meant to intimidate and show her seriousness; instead she wore a pair of sweats and a tee shirt, hair

falling frizzy around her shoulders after her shower, unpainted toes wiggling occasionally in an absent tic. It reminded Billy of when they were younger, when she'd been just his little sister, hanging out in his room when Neil was on a rampage she wanted to avoid the fallout of. It was better now though, because they weren't lashing out at each other, blaming the other for Neil's actions.

"Could've done without the shooting," Billy agreed with the redhead as he came out of the en suite, rubbing a towel through his wet hair. "Didn't expect Harrington to agree to anything so quickly."

Max shrugged, not looking up from her phone. "Either he's naïve and wants to give everyone the benefit of the doubt, or he wants to show he's different from his old man and this is a quick way to do it since Harrington Senior was dragging his heels."

"Or, third option, he has some sort of plan where he's wanted an alliance with us already and we played into his hand, and he's letting us believe that he's doing us a favor." Billy suggested, tossing his wet towel carelessly to the ground.

Max snorted. "Yeah, maybe. I'm still holding out for the naïve theory. He's like a puppy."

Billy stopped, turning his head from his dresser drawer to raise an incredulous eyebrow at her – not that she noticed, glued to her phone screen as she was. "Puppies don't lead mafias." He said anyway, and resumed digging through the drawer for a shirt. "Which means that's got to be a front. He wouldn't have made it this far if he was harmless."

"Puppies still have teeth," Max argued. "But I see your point. But also consider: did he ever expect to be the leader? Maybe when he was younger, but old man Harrington's death was definitely not natural."

"So he killed his dad – that's not unusual," Billy said with a shrug, finally pulling out a worn band tee shirt and pulling it over his head. He never wore it in public anymore, because there was a hole in the armpit and a tear at the bottom hem, but it was soft with age and comfy for lounging and sleeping in.

“No, that’s what I mean,” Max insisted. “I’m thinking Harrington was just as surprised by his old man’s death as anyone else was. I mean, if either of them were expecting him to die soon, surely they would’ve started introducing him to more people, so it wouldn’t be so rough with the transition. But Harrington was respecting his father’s wishes, to such a degree that *no one* knew about him, which would suggest that he didn’t play a part in his death.”

“Or,” Billy suggested, flopping onto the bed, “This new Harrington isn’t actually his son – maybe a nephew or something. I mean, we’re about the same age. Why didn’t I know about him as a teenager, before he ran off to New York or whatever?”

“Maybe he wasn’t always the intended heir,” Max supposed. “He didn’t say *why* he returned – maybe the heir died and he felt a responsibility to come back and take up the mantle.”

Billy rubbed a hand over his face. “This makes very little sense,” he muttered.

“It doesn’t really matter, anyway,” Max said carelessly. “We got what we needed – now we just need to exchange some people and see what skeletons the Italians have in their closet. *Fuck.*” The last word was muttered under her breath, a separate thought from her previous statement, and Billy looked over to see what had frustrated her, able to see the screen of her phone now from his angle on the bed.

Rather than documents or a text chat or anything that made sense though, something he might have expected, he saw a brightly colored screen informing her that she had failed the level of her game.

“Are you playing *Candy Crush*?” Billy said incredulously.

Max hummed absently, tapping the screen to try the level again. “It’s relaxing. And frustrating as hell.”

Billy didn’t know how something could be both frustrating and relaxing, but he didn’t have the energy to ask for an explanation either, so he just rolled his eyes and slid under the covers, grabbing his book off the bedside table. As he opened it though, he remembered something else, and paused, looking over at Max again.

“Did Murray cover things up with the cops?” he questioned. It wasn’t that he didn’t trust that Kali and Axel had been thorough in the cleanup, but usually contacting their plant in the Chicago PD fell to Jane or Max, and he didn’t want the possibility that it had slipped through the cracks.

Max clicked her tongue, not looking up from her game. “Nah, Harrington already had his guy Alexei something on it by the time Kali called up Murray.”

“Alexei,” Billy repeated dubiously, suspicions flaring up immediately. “Why does Harrington have a Russian in his crew?”

“Oh, he’s not from Chicago – he’s from Brighton Beach. New York,” she clarified, even though Billy already knew that. “I didn’t get the whole story, but he was in some sort of trouble back home when he met Harrington? Something like that. He wanted to get out of New York so when Harrington came back he followed, and Harrington pulled some strings to get him a job with Chicago PD.”

“What part of that story proves that we can trust him?” Billy demanded. “Or the Harrington family?”

Max’s phone screen lit up to let her know she’d passed the level, and while it played the ad between levels she looked up from her phone to shoot a grin over at him.

“Because *Murray* gave him the green light,” she said in a very satisfied voice.

Billy blinked. “Murray. The paranoid SOB who changes the verbal password every time we speak. The guy who doesn’t tell anyone his address, who has seven different safehouses whenever someone needs to meet him in person. The guy who still doubts whether I’m the ‘real’ Hargrove mafia boss, because I’ve shown him my face and that’s too suspicious for a crime leader. That Murray.”

“*That* Murray,” Max confirms. “I talked with him myself – apparently he’s known Alexei is a plant for the Harrington mafia for a while now. He didn’t give exact dates, but it sounds like it’s been a few months at least.”

Billy's expression darkened. "Think I need to have a little talk with him," he said calmly. "Clearly he needs to be reminded where his loyalties *should* lie, and what information is important to share."

"Well, I'm pretty sure he kept it secret because he and Alexei are fucking," Max said, her voice matter-of-fact, but she betrayed her delight with the gossip in the way she still hadn't gone back to her game, had turned to hang over the arm of the chair so that she could turn fully toward him.

Billy choked on his spit at her words, and coughed several times to clear his throat. "Don't force me to picture Murray *naked*, Max."

"I think it's cute!" she defended, her eyes dancing. "Murray said he didn't trust Alexei at first either, but Alexei was the one to find out about Murray even though at the time the Harringtons didn't like the Hargroves – it was before the talks of an alliance. But then they were put together for a job with the cops – not related to any mafia thing – and they got in some shit and Alexei *took a bullet for Murray*! And so Murray gave him the benefit of the doubt, and he hadn't found anything about him being affiliated with the Russians anyway, and they became 'friends'. Which, we all know what *that's* code for."

"Murray told you all this?" Billy questioned, because that was surprisingly detailed for the man and that only made it all the more suspicious.

Max actually rolled her eyes. "No. A lot was pieced together with a couple of his comments and with some background searching into Alexei's history, assignments with the cops, and all that."

"Hm," Billy said doubtfully, already pulling out his phone to go look into this guy more. "Last name."

"Billy, *no*," Max said, voice bordering on a whine. "Heather is already looking into it more deeply – I was only telling you this to gossip!"

"Why the hell would I want to know about Murray's sexual exploits?" Billy said with a wrinkled nose.

"Because it's like Romeo and Juliet!" Max exclaimed. "Except without

the double suicide. It's *cute*!"

Billy rolled his eyes, telling her, "I need to make sure this Alexei *actually* covered things up with the cops today so I don't wake up to a shit show tomorrow."

Max groaned loudly and overdramatically, flopping back in the chair. "You're no fun," she complained, and got to her feet, seeing that he wasn't budging in his intent. "It's Utgoff. Alexei Utgoff. I'm going to go talk with Jane, because at least she'll actually *appreciate* the gossip. Don't let your paranoia keep you up too late."

Billy rolled his eyes as she left, door clicking closed behind her, and turned to his phone. He paused as he typed in Alexei Utgoff's name, pondering for a moment before he backspaced it all and typed *Steven John Harrington* instead. Sliding further into his bed, he settled down to read up more on this guy's mysterious past.

An hour later, Billy was a little disappointed with his discoveries – or the lack thereof.

He did discover, at least, that Steven was indeed the son of the late leader to the Harrington mafia. He was eight months older than Billy, and he had no siblings. He had known that Charlotte Harrington had been killed when Billy was about six – he remembered hiding from Neil a lot in those days, because every mafia had been pitted against each other then, suspicious of everyone else and not knowing why the woman had been killed, not knowing if they were going to be targeted next as former alliances strained and crumbled under the pressure – but he hadn't connected that that must be why Steven had been kept a secret for so long. That was when the Italians had begun sticking to themselves more, not getting involved in the turf wars that most others engaged at some point or another in during those intervening years.

After the Harrington matriarch had been killed, Billy didn't find any more information about Steven – not until his NYU application showed up when the guy was seventeen. He read over it, thought it very dry, especially the essay part that had no feeling at all. But he'd

scored high on his SATs after private tutoring growing up – or so Billy supposed, considering that there were no grade school records – and when Billy looked at that year's donations to the university, he found a large chunk that upon further inspection had definitely been donated by a mafia. Considering the circumstances, Billy accurately guessed that Steven had bribed his way in. Oh, he had the good grades, but there was nothing else to make him stand out, especially at a school like NYU, so a little money to grease the wheels with admissions made sense.

None of it told him *why* Steven had wanted to attend college – and for *art*, of all things. He dug into his school records, writing down on the notepad on the nightstand the names of all of his roommates – just in case. He saw how his grades in his first two terms were all A's, how they slowly dropped lower through each term, until he graduated with a 3.1 GPA. Not particularly impressive. After college, he held jobs at places like Starbucks and grocery stores, off and on and never for very long at any place. Billy smirked a little, imagining the Harrington heir thinking he would make it in the world of art, of slowly realizing that outside of his family name he wasn't shit. There was something satisfying in that, in the way he had come crawling back to daddy dearest after working shitty retail jobs that were so far beneath him he couldn't keep it up for more than a few weeks each time.

He tossed his phone aside though when that was the end of his findings. He was a decent hack – not as good as Heather, but then few people were – so he didn't expect to find anything else on Steven Harrington. He stared up at the ceiling, thinking of the school ID picture he'd found in the NYU database. He'd had longer hair then, looking soft like he knew how to take care of it and make it look *good*. The hair that Harrington bore now was stricter, with a part on the side rather than fluffed back carelessly.

Unwillingly, his mind wandered back to the memory of Harrington staring at him over the top of his water glass earlier that day, the way he had considered him with his cool gaze. The memory shifted, to the hard look in Harrington's eyes when he'd been pointing the gun back at Billy, and he felt his dick beginning to fill the more he reflected back on it. He absently reached down to palm himself over his

sweats, before he realized what he was doing, and with a frustrated groan, he pulled his hand away and rolled over on his stomach, shoving his face into his pillow as though to suffocate himself with it.

It's not like it was the first time he'd come across a pretty face, or someone threatening him with a gun in his face, or even both at the same time. But something about Harrington was especially alluring, and fuck if Billy couldn't figure out what it was. For all he knew, he was exactly the kind of guy he not only didn't want to do business with, but would want to actively take down. Some crimes were just *too* far, and the thing with the Russians, while true, wasn't the main reason he had reached out to the Italians for an alliance. He needed to remember that and stop thinking with his hormones – he wasn't a teenager anymore.

Blowing out a breath, Billy reached over and turned off the lamp. He could think about these things tomorrow.

Steve was pissed, but he was very careful not to show it. He was in public – or public *enough* – and he didn't need anyone to be using his display of emotion as a reason for his weakness – whatever that emotion might be. He was well practiced in putting on a pleasant face though – his father had trained him well, growing up.

“Thank you,” he said when Damien had finished his report. “Have Lauren look into it – I want to know where it's gone.”

He kept under wraps just what “it” was, exactly, that had gone missing. It didn't matter – his people would do their jobs either way, but he didn't want anyone getting the wrong idea of what he was doing here, the way the Harrington empire was going to be run with its new leader. Only three other people in his crew knew what had gone missing, because he didn't know who to trust with the recent happenings.

Damien dipped his head in acquiescence. “Yes, Sir,” he said, which would probably never stop being weird – Steve had known this man longer than he could remember, had been babysat by him several times. He hadn't expected to be the head of the family so soon, with

all of his father's old men responding to him now, obeying him.

Steve waved his hand in dismissal, and Damien turned and left the room, letting the door fall closed behind him. Steve sat at his desk – the one that had once been his father's, and it was just as strange as he had expected, to be on this side of it – with fingers laced together in front of him, the knuckles resting against his lips and elbows resting on top of the desk.

Tommy was quiet behind him, waiting for word or instruction, but Steve ignored him for a moment, and didn't bother to resist the urge to toss back the last ounce of scotch at the bottom of his glass – not because he liked the drink, but because it was his father's preferred brand and it was just one of those things about keeping up appearances.

As soon as the glass was empty though, with a strong flick of his wrist Steve hurled the glass at the opposite wall, causing it to shatter in pieces and fall to the floor. It did nothing to cool his anger, only made him want to break something else, too.

"Steve, buddy," Dustin intervened, stepping up next to him and laying a hand on his shoulder, "There will always be the occasional setback. Lauren will find the ones responsible – don't worry."

"I already need to be concerned with finding who is responsible for my father's death – I don't need to be piling this on top of it," Steve growled, not looking at Dustin – but he didn't shake the hand off his shoulder either. "There were at least eight girls in that shipment – probably more. We need to find them before anyone *else* does." His voice was filled with meaning, reminding the other three of the possibilities of being discovered – not that they needed the reminder.

He blew out a breath and spun around in his chair, looking to Carol. "Set up another meeting with Hargrove. We can deal with that problem for now."

Notes for the Chapter:

I don't actually know which mafia has the most power in Chicago, but I do know that Chicago has

the highest number of Poles out of any other U.S. city, so it fit. And if it doesn't...this is fanfic anyway. ;)

Hope you liked it so far - let me know! Also note the new tags added before each chapter! I'm adding them as I go.

3. Chapter 3

Summary for the Chapter:

“Mr. Harrington,” Billy greeted in a pleasant voice as he continued to walk down the sidewalk.

“Mr. Hargrove,” Harrington returned, with the same faux sweetness. “Have you been making friends?”

“I could ask you the same question,” Billy said, voice darkening a little. He didn’t know what Harrington meant, whether he was talking about someone else or if he was taunting him that he knew the FBI was looking into him, but he didn’t like it. He wanted to demand what was going on, but forced himself to be rational about this – “But I don’t think it’s wise to have this conversation over the phone.”

“Hm,” Harrington agreed, voice as placid as ever, both of them pretending that they weren’t each threatening the other. “I can meet tonight.”

Notes for the Chapter:

The sexy times start in this chapter, and then they'll be in just about every chapter from here on out because why not. ;p Hope you like that, and also the plot! Lol there is plot too.

Billy had picked two people that he trusted most in his crew for the exchange. Well – he couldn’t send Max, as she was his second, and he couldn’t send Jane, because she was his personal bodyguard. So, he chose the next best, in Robin and Kali. Robin was an unassuming badass, with her freckled face, minimal makeup, and general girl-next-door look, so he knew that although Harrington would be aware of how he sent in someone who looked like that in an attempt to get his guard to relax around her, it also would serve in doing just that – at least on a subconscious level. She knew how to blend in more, and she was actually fluent in Italian, so the placement would actually

serve her well.

Kali was the outwardly obvious choice, because she was quite visibly a badass, with her dark leather and clunky boots, at least three guns on her person at all times – and that wasn't even getting into the various *other* types of weapons that she had. He was hesitant to separate her from Jane for such an indeterminate length of time, knowing the security that they found in each other, but he also knew that both of them would rather that Kali went – she had a personal stake in what they were doing here and didn't have as visibly high status with the Hargroves as Jane did. Kali would be able to pick up on other things that Robin might not, because of her history and the fact that her face was not so well known within other mafia families as Jane's was, having been around him so much.

He did have to take the time to explain to Robin just why she was being chosen to be ambassador with the Harringtons, as well as what she was expected to look for while there. Although initially skeptical, upon learning that Kali was the other one chosen to go over with her, she was quick to agree. (Billy would like to think that it was willingness to help him out of loyalty, or even determination for the cause they were allying themselves with the Italians *for*, but he saw a familiar gleam in her eye that she wasn't quite able to hide, and was pretty sure that she had a crush on the half-Indian girl and was glad to have a reason and an excuse to spend more time with her. Billy hadn't intended to be playing matchmaker to anyone, but he also trusted both of them to do their jobs no matter what happened, so he didn't bother changing his plans.)

He'd had Max text Carol the names of the people he was sending over so that they could do their own checks, and moments later Max had received a response for the people that Harrington was sending over. Billy had let Heather do the background checks to make sure everything was clear before he had studied what she had gathered himself, just to get a feel for how he could use them and what to be aware of.

The ones he was sending over were Michael Wheeler – whom Billy remembered from the pizza parlor – and Lucas Sinclair, whom he was completely unfamiliar with. Upon studying the information presented, he figured Mike had about the equivalent job with the

Harrington mafia as Kali did in his own, which was a smart move, he supposed, but it did make him curious about his past history. The kid – who wasn't really a kid, but he was younger than Billy, so whatever – was twenty-four, just a year older than Jane. He was from a small town near Indianapolis, but his family had moved to Chicago when he was a teenager. He'd joined the Harrington mafia roughly three years previous, based on estimated accounts of when he was seen, and he was apparently in a relationship with that doctor Harrington kept on call – William Myers, who had joined the Italians around the same time.

Well, Billy thought absently, even if Harrington turned out to be a piece of shit in every other way that mattered, at least he wasn't homophobic, having two gay men in higher positions in his mafia. It was the twenty-first century, but especially in traditional mafias, one could never be too certain.

The other man was the same age as Wheeler – Lucas Sinclair. He'd grown up in Chicago and been in the Harrington mafia for about four years now. He generally stuck to the background, so there weren't a lot of pictures or information on the guy about his time with the Harringtons, but he had become a more prominent figure in the family in the last few months, being seen more and more often within the security around Harrington.

Honestly, Billy wasn't sure what to think about Harrington's choices. Kali had been a runner for the Hargroves when she'd first started out; she'd been with them for over a decade now. Robin had joined at eighteen; she was coming up on a decade. They had both been in the family long enough that they had earned Billy's trust, and he knew that they would not only be safe with the Harrington family, but that they would get the jobs done that Billy needed them to do.

But Harrington was sending over people who had been with the family for less than half that time – did he just not care? Were they a red herring for something larger?

Then again, he supposed, Harrington had said himself that he hadn't spoken to anyone in his family while he'd been in New York, and he'd only returned to Chicago four years ago. Perhaps he hadn't wanted to send over anyone he'd known before, but only the people

he had grown to trust in his new time there.

Or, *did* he trust them? Billy wondered. Was that the point? He only trusted people whom his father had trusted for so long, and now he was sending people he was uncertain about? Was it a test? If so, was it a test for Wheeler and Sinclair, or was it for the Hargrove family?

He supposed he would find out soon; for now he would just focus on his own goals.

They met in an old hotel – one that wasn't Harrington or Hargrove owned – and Billy couldn't help the thought that it felt very much like a hostage exchange. None of them had weapons except for those who were bringing theirs with them as ambassadors to either family, as per the stipulations of their arrangement. Billy didn't *really* think that he had anything to worry about with the Harringtons turning on them, but still he couldn't help feeling naked and exposed without even a revolver on him. He hoped that Harrington felt the same way.

Billy was surprised to see the one he remembered as Dustin Henderson there at the exchange. So far as he remembered, the guy had been the intended Harrington heir up until he suddenly disappeared from the immediate public a few years ago. His was another – smaller – Italian family who had made an alliance with the Harringtons when Billy was nineteen or so, and his father had died just a few months later, so John Harrington had taken him under his wing, practically adopting him as his son. It had never been confirmed, but Billy had been pretty sure he would be the leader of the Italian mafia once John had died. But then it was only about a year after Billy had taken over the Hargrove empire that Henderson had disappeared, and Billy had been so caught up in his own family and responsibilities that he hadn't given the guy more thought than the vague supposition that he'd died or something.

He realized a moment later though, that it was around approximately that time that Steven Harrington had returned from New York. Harrington must have been reinstated immediately as the intended heir, John shoving Henderson to the side for his biological son.

He kept subtle eyes on the guy at that realization, because everyone knew that John Harrington's death was suspicious at best. It was

possible that Henderson had decided to off the guy, not realizing that John had stipulated in his will who would take over for him. Henderson might try something toward Steven too, and then Billy would be dealing with someone else as the head of the family – someone who might reverse their alliance, or try some other angle at this attack.

The meeting wasn't all that long – they each shared expectations, rehashing what Carol and Max had already discussed, just so that everyone was on the same page. It was mostly logistical duties that Billy found honestly very boring. He found himself using Harrington as a distraction, just watching him and the way that he moved as he spoke, and giving automatic answers in response.

When they left, neither side's ambassadors bade farewell to the other. That would be weakness. Instead, Billy exchanged a short nod with Harrington, and then they parted ways.

Wheeler and Sinclair kept to themselves – either that, or they just kept away from Billy in particular. Billy didn't mind at all – he knew that Jane and Max spent more time with them, and they knew what was going on enough that Billy knew that he would hear any important updates as soon as they happened. For a couple of days, he thought that they might have been keeping something from him, but when he questioned Max about it she just laughed and called it “gossip that you would be *completely* uninterested in”. Considering the fact that he didn't want to hear more gossip like last time she'd wanted to share, he let it go and left that sort of nonsense between Max and Jane.

About a week after they'd made the exchange, Billy was alone. This was a rare thing, with Max's overprotectiveness and Jane's paranoia, but it wasn't as coincidental as one would assume. He knew that Jane had requested the night off, and Max thought that he was making plans in his room for another approach to the Chinese for an alliance. Sometimes it got suffocating, being watched all the time, so he slipped past his security and made for his favorite taco stand, deciding to walk because it's not like anyone would expect something so mundane of a mafia boss. He was still wearing his suit from the

day, but he blended in well enough with every other businessman coming home from work that he wasn't concerned.

The taco truck was run by a man named Paolo, who was actually Brazilian, and although he wasn't in German-controlled territory, he had always been friendly to Billy, and put extra meat on his tacos without asking or charging extra. Billy had liked to come and talk with him when he'd been a kid and Neil had gotten a little too rough in his "corrections". Billy supposed that after you saw a ten-year-old beat six ways to Sunday, it was hard to really be intimidated by them, even now that he was all grown up and head of the German mafia. Not that he had ever *tried* intimidating Paolo – for one thing, there was no reason to, and for another Billy genuinely liked the now old man.

He talked with him while Paolo prepared his usual order of tacos, glad to see he was doing well. Paolo chattered at him, sharing his vindictive glee at the fact that the taco truck the next block over had been shut down due to sanitary reasons, and now he had gotten back the customers that had been stolen by the truck's arrival months before. Billy just congratulated him, not revealing the fact that he had been the one to plant a cockroach ootheca under the sink and call the health inspectors a day later. He accepted the tacos, shoved a hundred in the tip jar while ignoring Paolo's usual protests, and walked off with a wave.

He had just finished eating his first taco, and hadn't yet made it to the next block down the road, when someone stepped in front of him, saying in a strict voice, "William Hargrove, a moment of your time?"

Billy refrained from groaning, looking up and seeing a face he didn't personally recognize, but he knew who this guy was. All feds looked the same, with their boring, ill-fitted suits off the rack, with the short hair and constipated expression, like a stick was lodged permanently up their ass.

He knew that the fed's question wasn't actually a question – occasionally someone in the FBI or in the police or some other governmental organization would get it in their head that they would be the ones to take down the mafias in Chicago, and he would suffer through amateurish questioning before he managed to get them to

leave him alone for a while with a vow that they would see him again. It never amounted to anything, because Billy's people were good at what they did and they knew how to cover their tracks.

Still, there was no escaping it now, and he may as well get it over with.

But that was no reason to stop eating his late dinner, and so he kept eye contact with the agent while taking a bite of his second taco, and then said, "How can I help you, Agent?" while chewing.

The agent didn't look startled that he'd been identified as such so easily (which told Billy a lot to begin with), and said, "I'm Special Agent Peter Ballard with the FBI. I just had a few questions regarding your company."

"You got a warrant?" Billy suggested with a mocking grin. "Because I don't know that I feel like catering to you."

"Just asking questions," the agent said, unbothered.

"Well, come back when you have something useful," Billy said with a dismissive wave, making as though he was going to walk away. "My company is a perfectly legitimate construction business."

"You've been seen recently with a Mr. Steven Harrington," the agent continued, undeterred by Billy's half-hearted attempts at getting rid of him and pressing on insistently. "I'm sure you know his family owns and runs a large shipping company."

Billy raised an eyebrow at him, because that wasn't where he'd expected the questions to lead – he wouldn't have thought an alliance with the Italians would be that big of a deal, in the grand scheme of things. Not enough that the FBI would be looking into it before they'd even been allied for a whole month.

Unless, of course, there were things going on in the Italian side to make the FBI leery...

Fighting the urge to grit his teeth, because he could deal with the implications of *that* later on, he said calmly, "And? I have locations all over the country – I need my supplies shipped, and Harrington

International is reputable.”

“It is suspicious that a German known to be proud of his heritage would make overtures of friendship to an equally proud Italian,” Agent Ballard said, which Billy knew was a way of hinting at the fact that they were both heads of their respective mafias, but still the wording of it tickled him with wicked delight, because the agent had walked right in to that one.

“Well, that’s pretty racist of you,” he drawled. “This isn’t the forties anymore – we ‘proud Germans’ don’t want to take over the world and kill the ‘undesirables’.” He took another bite of his taco, and a little bit of salsa seeped out the end, so he caught it with his finger before it could fall and stuck the finger in his mouth.

“Your father was uninterested in friendly relations with most others,” Agent Ballard said. “You can understand why it would make the FBI suspicious that you are widening your horizons, so to speak.”

Billy frowned – let Ballard see the frown, because he wasn’t afraid to let people know that he disliked his dad, despite the fact that he was now dead. “I’m not my old man,” he said with tightened lips. His phone started buzzing in his pocket, but he ignored it, supposing Max had discovered he was gone and was calling to figure out where he was. He continued, “I like Harrington’s company. We’re *friends*. And that’s all there is to it – friends give each other business, you know?”

“Harrington International is suspected in a number of crimes, including smuggling and fraud,” Ballard went on relentlessly. “We have recent intel that says they may have branched out into trafficking. Is that really something that you want your *family* to get involved in?” He said the word ‘family’ with particular scorn, because they both knew that he really wanted to use the term ‘mafia’ instead but as an agent couldn’t exactly make those accusations without proof.

“Those claims are unsubstantiated, or we would be having a *very* different conversation,” Billy said smoothly, because those were the lines he was supposed to say. His phone finally stopped buzzing in his pocket, and he made a mental note to call Max back. “There’s always nasty rumors about rich people, because the smaller people like to

blame the rich for why capitalism has failed them. So maybe before going and making accusations”—he leaned in a little closer, hissing out his next words—“*find the damn proof.*” He shoved the last bite of his taco into his mouth as he began to walk away. “It’s been a pleasure as always, Agent,” he called without looking back.

“You’ll be seeing me again soon!” the agent said, just as Billy had known he would.

“I’m sure!” he sang.

As he reached the corner, he tossed the paper from the tacos into the trash can, allowing his suspicions and anger with Harrington to increase now that he was away from the fed. He really needed to ask the guy some pointed questions – namely, why the hell a fed was approaching *now*, because he’d never had problems when he’d met with John Harrington, but now all of a sudden they were sniffing up his tree again? If Harrington was planning to double-cross him to the feds, he was going to get a whole lot of hell rained down on him.

The very thought of being betrayed set his teeth on edge, pulled his top lip back slightly in a furious snarl. He pulled his phone out of his front pocket, with the intention of calling Max to set up another meeting with Harrington, just as it began to buzz again. He expected it to be Max again, remembered how she’d been trying to call while he’d been talking with the agent, and was glad that he at least knew she was available right then and they could deal with this immediately.

But when he looked down at his phone, he was surprised to see the name *Steve Harrington* displayed along the top of the screen. He’d never communicated with the guy directly – it had always been through their people – but he’d gotten the number from Max just in case right before the exchange. He didn’t know why Harrington himself would be calling him now, and he could practically hear Max’s voice in his head scolding him for not going through channels to communicate with the head of another mafia – but still it didn’t stop him from swiping to answer the call, holding the phone up to his ear.

“Mr. Harrington,” Billy greeted in a pleasant voice as he continued to

walk down the sidewalk.

“Mr. Hargrove,” Harrington returned, with the same faux sweetness. “Have you been making friends?”

“I could ask you the same question,” Billy said, voice darkening a little. He didn’t know what Harrington meant, whether he was talking about someone else or if he was taunting him that he knew the FBI was looking into him, but he didn’t like it. He wanted to demand what was going on, but forced himself to be rational about this – “But I don’t think it’s wise to have this conversation over the phone.”

“Hm,” Harrington agreed, voice as placid as ever, both of them pretending that they weren’t each threatening the other. “I can meet tonight.”

“Good,” Billy expressed calmly, and glanced at his watch. It was a few minutes before six pm. “There’s a gym on the corner of Washington and Hitt. It closes at six.”

“I’ll be there in forty minutes,” Harrington promised.

“Make it thirty,” Billy countered, and Harrington surprisingly readily agreed.

Once he was off the phone with Harrington, Billy shot off a quick text to Max – who hadn’t been calling after all; it had been Harrington calling the first time too – to let her know that he was out for the evening, that he was going to the gym. It wasn’t really a lie, but he also didn’t tell her that he was meeting Harrington without any backup. He didn’t really think Harrington was going to be plotting to kill him – not if he really was double-crossing him to the feds.

He really hoped he wasn’t double-crossing him. It would be such a shame to have to kill such a pretty boy.

Max wasn’t pleased that he’d slipped his security again, but she left him to it because this was a long-standing argument that neither of them were going to win, and sometimes it was just better to leave him to his whims so that he didn’t bottle everything up until he

lashed out. She did make him promise to check in with her in a couple of hours, but other than that she let him go.

He probably would have looked wildly out of place, showing up at the gym in his suit, but as expected no one else was there except for the single worker closing up. Billy grinned at her, because he liked Tammy and she definitely had a crush on him, but she was also smart enough to not get involved with someone like him. It made the chase something of a game – where they could just flirt with each other, with the understanding on both their ends that it would never go anywhere. This was one of his favorite gyms because of Tammy, and her willingness to leave him with reign of the building after she'd closed up, despite the fact that the gym wasn't in his territory and she therefore didn't really have an obligation to cater to him. Last time he'd come to blow off some steam, she'd given him a key, just in case he needed to come in the middle of the night when she wasn't there to let him in.

Billy chatted with her while she finished locking up the back doors, and she told him that since last time, the girl who came in sometimes whom she'd had her eye on had asked her on a date, and now they were going to go on a third one once Kiarra got off of work. Billy told Tammy that he would need to meet this "Kiarra", make sure she was a good fit, and rather than being alarmed or intimidated Tammy laughed and lightly slapped his arm. It was then that Billy realized that he may have actually made a *friend* in this girl, because only a few in his crew were comfortable enough touching him so casually like that, and he'd known them for years – it was odd that someone, someone who knew who he was, who was a civilian, could still be so comfortable with him.

He was still pondering on this odd realization when Tammy grabbed her bag and went out the front door to leave, just as Harrington himself approached the front doors. Billy watched through the windows as Tammy stopped Harrington, having a short exchange before Harrington gestured to the inside, clearly saying that he was meeting Billy there. It was odd, to Billy, to be seeing Harrington much more casual and relaxed than he'd been all the other times he'd seen him – the guy actually *smiled* at Tammy and Billy thought his brain might have stopped working at that.

He was forcing himself to focus again when he saw Tammy turn and insert her key into the lock on the front door, opening it for Harrington with a smile that looked almost *knowing*. Billy didn't know what the hell she was thinking, but after Harrington had come through, she took a moment to peek her head in and meet eyes with Billy, giving him a very *suggestive* eyebrow wiggle and a thumbs up before making her escape, letting the door fall closed behind her.

Billy could feel his face flushing a little, because *clearly* Harrington hadn't introduced himself as head of the Harrington family, or Tammy wouldn't be getting the idea that they were meeting here to – do whatever it is she thought they were going to do. Surely she would be a lot more leery, if she knew just who Harrington was – and honestly, he didn't really know how she missed it, because Harrington could clearly be charming, but he was *also* in a tailored suit and wore the Harrington signet and just *held* himself like a mafia boss should.

(He ignored the fact that Harrington had looked much the same at his father's funeral, and Billy hadn't recognized him as such then – these facts were irrelevant and Tammy should've *known*.)

Harrington's expression had closed off when he came face to face with Billy, not at all with the open friendliness he'd bestowed on Tammy. Billy felt his own expression doing the same thing.

"You didn't bring anyone else with you?" Billy checked, despite the fact that Harrington had come in alone.

"Neither did you," Harrington retorted, and Billy tilted his head in wordless acquiescence. Then Steve elaborated, "Vicki will be back in an hour."

Billy wasn't sure he trusted that, or that he really was alone here, so he angled his head toward the back hallway.

"C'mon," he directed, turning and walking away, expecting Harrington to follow. "Basketball courts don't have windows."

"So," Harrington said as they walked through the doors to the court. "I had an FBI agent come to me in my place of business tonight.

Asked a bunch of questions about what we were doing together. You wouldn't happen to know anything about that, would you?"

Billy stopped in his tracks, because – that didn't make sense. Harrington was supposed to have been the one to call the FBI on the Hargroves, because *that* made sense. Harrington was new, wanted to get rid of another family, and was stupid enough to think that going to the FBI about it was the best plan. But if Harrington was working with the FBI, then he wouldn't have been the one to reach out to Billy, to think that *Billy* was the one working with the feds. He would've left it alone, not wanting to raise any suspicions if he knew about it.

"Your first call," Billy said, turning to face Harrington with hands in his pockets and ignoring the suspicious evaluation he got for the pose, "I didn't pick up because I was talking with a fed. He approached me, asked about what we were doing together."

Harrington frowned, some of the defensiveness fading from his expression and his stance. "Someone set them on us both."

"Looks like it," Billy blew out a breath, walked further onto the court because sometimes he needed to pace while he was thinking. "There would be no other reason for the feds to have picked up on our families' alliance so quickly."

Harrington's frown grew, his hands going to his hips as he thought. "You must have a rat in your crew."

Billy ripped his eyes away from where they'd been wandering over Harrington's form and the way his shirt pulled tighter across his chest with the placement of his arms. He frowned deeply at the man, saying, "Hold up, why is it *my* family that has the rat? How do we know it's not someone on your side?"

Harrington waved an almost dismissive hand at Billy, only stoking the flames of his ire as he said, "Someone in your family must not like the thought of an alliance with mine."

Billy's frown transformed into a scowl, because this guy, *honestly*. "You're the one who *left* your family for eight years – it wouldn't be

surprising that some people aren't so loyal as you'd like to believe," he argued. "Also, let's just review really quick – which family is it that has recently had the most *suspicious* death of its leader? And you seriously want to tell *me* that I should be concerned about my peoples' loyalty?"

Harrington stared at him, and for a fleeting moment Billy thought the guy was going to snap, was going to whip out his gun in retaliation for his words, that their alliance was about to be flushed down the drain for a few biting comments – and then he shrugged and glanced away.

"You may have a point," he said, frowning again in thought. "I think you're the first person outside a couple in my family to say outright that my father's death wasn't natural."

"There was *nothing* natural about your old man's death," Billy scoffed, turning to pace down the length of the sideline. "He was stronger than some of his security, went running every day, ate so healthy he made *me* feel bad about my dietary habits – people like that don't die of a *heart attack*. Which makes me think poison, and that the coroner was paid off." He turned to look at Harrington again, saw that he'd wandered over to the display of basketballs for use on the other side of the court, was tapping his fingers along the tops of them.

"So," Billy said seriously. "This doesn't mean I discount the idea of a rat in my crew – I will look, and rain hell on anyone I find is a traitor. But you also need to look at your people and figure out who's disgruntled on your end." Pointedly, he said, "I would pay *particular* attention to those who would have had control of the Harrington empire, had you not returned."

Harrington picked up one of the basketballs, passing it back and forth absently in his hands. "Are you suggesting...?"

"Henderson," Billy said flatly. "He was all set to take over until you came along, and then he disappeared into the woodwork again. Especially after his family joined yours, and he could no longer be the head of a family, I'm sure he was counting on one day leading yours. He probably didn't know that you were already set up officially to become the head, counted on your secrecy to allow him

to take over. He makes the most sense.”

Harrington let out something halfway between a scoff and a laugh. “No, if you knew Dustin, you would know how wrong you are. He never wanted to lead. For that matter, neither did I, but it’s what was expected of me. Even still, I asked him after my dad died – said he could become head and I could just be his second. He didn’t want it – said that the four years of not having the expectations he had before was a relief that he didn’t want to give up. I know we haven’t really known each other long, in the grand scheme of things, but we’re like brothers; he’s definitely not the traitor.”

Knowing all this now, Billy had to admit that all of that did make sense. He didn’t really know where to go from there, but whatever – it wasn’t his problem, it was Harrington’s.

Then he frowned, looking at Harrington as the guy began slowly dribbling the ball, passing it back and forth between each hand. “If you didn’t think you’d be a good leader then why the hell did you decide to lead?”

Harrington looked at him with a flat expression. “I said I didn’t *want* it, not that I thought I’d be *bad* at it. I was raised in this – it’s easy. It’s just not where I expected to go with my life.”

Billy hummed, backing down, because that made sense too and he didn’t exactly want to piss off the other head with this new-ish alliance.

“So,” he said, beginning to pace again while Harrington dribbled the ball behind him, “Someone is upset about our alliance. The question now is whether it’s because someone on one of our sides hates the other, or if it’s because they would rather ally with someone else that they *can’t* with us being cozy, or if they want to destabilize either side for a takeover.”

“Turning us on each other could have started a war, if we hadn’t talked with each other immediately,” Harrington supposed. That’s true – they could have been counting on old suspicions prevailing over communication and common sense. “It might not even be about our families specifically – just something to destabilize *all* the

families in Chicago, if sides had been picked.”

“It’s already on shaky ground – accelerating the confrontation with the Russians could’ve been their goal,” Billy agreed. On his next turn, he noticed that the soles of his shoes were leaving black smudges occasionally as he walked. “Force a war before we’re ready, so they can take over in the chaos.” Suddenly he stopped walking as something occurred to him.

“That agent – he was talking about our *businesses*,” he said. “He didn’t seem to care so much about us in particular as what we were doing with our companies.”

Harrington’s expression was confused. “So? Feds are always looking at our businesses – it’s a part of the life.”

“But specifically he was talking about my construction company and your shipping company,” Billy explained, scratching the hair on the back of his head. “He didn’t bring up your hotel chain or casinos, or my distilleries or bars.”

“So, whoever this traitor is, they’re concerned about something being shipped probably in your supplies, by my company,” Harrington deduced. “Or something that you want shipped, that they don’t want me to find out about.”

“All I actively ship is drugs,” Billy said bluntly. “Maybe it’s something that you’ll be putting in among my crates, someone on your side doesn’t want ours finding out.”

Harrington blinked at him, pausing in his dribbling, and Billy didn’t really expect the guy to confess right there what Billy had been looking for, but still he was a little disappointed when he just shrugged and started his dribbling again.

“I’ll look into it, look over the books more,” Harrington said vaguely, turning toward the hoop nearest to him. “I know a lot about what my family does, but it *has* been a few years; I’m sure things changed without anyone thinking to inform me.” He stopped dribbling, took aim, and tossed the ball at the hoop; it fell smoothly through the netting without hitting the rim at all.

Billy was a little surprised, and he didn't bother to hide it as Harrington jogged to grab the ball again as it hit the ground. "You play?" He wouldn't have expected a guy who seemed much more outwardly prissy to be one to get his hands dirty with a game like basketball. Not that it was especially dirty, but somehow Billy had imagined him being the type who only cared to work up a sweat in bed, in pursuit of other pleasures rather than something as basic as a sport played in junior high.

Harrington glanced over at him, looking almost abashed before turning back to the hoop, dribbling for a moment and taking aim again. "Not really. Just something I got into in New York. But I've never been a part of any team or anything – just playing for fun."

Billy grinned, because much as he might hate to admit it, the fact that Harrington liked something so simple and uncomplicated just made him like the guy more; it made him more real as a person. It made him something attainable, and therefore much more attractive.

He jogged over, and just as Harrington caught the ball as it bounced to the ground, Billy darted in and snatched it from him, taking the guy by surprise.

"Wh..." Harrington protested, before seeing the grin on Billy's face as he jogged backwards, dribbling the ball one-handed by his side as he went.

"C'mon, Harrington," he taunted, "Come take it."

Harrington visibly pushed back a smile, and then a moment later he was darting toward Billy to try getting the ball. Billy immediately turned around and bolted down the length of the court. He had just shot it toward the basket when Harrington plowed into him from behind. Billy stumbled a little, but was smug to see the basket go through the hoop – just in time for Harrington to zip forward and grab the ball for himself.

Billy discovered that he was a faster runner – just slightly, but enough that he was able to get up close behind Harrington, blocking him and guarding the other hoop while he moved to try and find a way out. He felt the gun at the small of Harrington's back dig into his

stomach, which he'd expected, but he only pressed closer with arms out to block wherever the guy turned.

"Jesus," Harrington huffed, but he still sounded amused through his frustration, and a moment later he feinted left before whirling to the right, shooting the ball toward the hoop immediately in such a clean throw that Billy felt his mouth go a little dry at the sight of it. He was already running off to grab the ball, but it wasn't long before Billy grabbed it from him and he was having to fend off Harrington's own attempts at blocking him from shooting. His nerves lit up with the feeling of the heat pressing along the length of his back, at the feeling of danger that he was this close to the other mafia head, at the scent of Harrington's cologne mingled with the growing smell of sweat.

They were fairly evenly matched, but they weren't keeping score either, just having fun playing against each other.

They'd been playing for close to ten minutes when Billy got a devious idea upon seeing Harrington's occasional fumbling footwork, and the next time Harrington was blocking him, he hooked a foot around one ankle and *pulled* even as he turned and shot the ball into the basket.

"Wha – that's illegal!" Harrington sputtered from the ground, but he was laughing as he said it so Billy knew he wasn't actually too upset.

Billy jogged back over to him, ignoring the ball bouncing slowly to a stop, smug smile on his face. "Arrest me," he deadpanned, because there were *far* more illegal things he did in his time, and they both knew it. He reached out a hand to help Harrington to his feet, which he wasn't even surprised at this point that the guy accepted.

He was pulled halfway up when Billy stopped pulling, just holding him there in limbo as he leaned down into his face, staring into milk chocolate eyes and giving him a wicked smirk.

"Plant your feet, Harrington."

He let go before Harrington could process the words and the warning, letting him fall back to the ground, but he hadn't counted on Harrington's quick response either. He was thus surprised when Harrington's foot kicked out suddenly at the inside of one ankle

before sweeping to the other one, knocking him off his feet so that he fell right on top of Harrington, catching himself quickly with arms on either side of his shoulders. Harrington was already laughing, smirking at him in a way so innocently victorious that Billy really couldn't be expected to be able to help himself.

His lips had just pressed to Harrington's when he remembered himself, remembered who was under him, remembered that it would be *very stupid* to fuck up this alliance and all they were trying to accomplish with complications like *this* – but then before he could pull back, take it back, apologize, Harrington responded by pushing his head up into the kiss, returning the pressure on his lips in equal measure.

Billy groaned, pushing himself harder into Harrington's body, hands going into that hair that he wanted to mess up so badly, to make it fluffy like he'd seen in the old photos. He felt Harrington's hands travel into his own hair, tugging sharply at the curly locks at the base of his neck even as he bit savagely into Billy's bottom lip, and Billy would be embarrassed at the sound that escaped him at that if he wasn't so fucking aroused. He shoved one thick thigh between Harrington's legs, a dark thrill igniting in him at the hardness grinding back into him as he ground down on Harrington's own leg.

Billy moved his lips to Harrington's neck, sucking a mark right next to the three freckles lined up on smooth skin next to his ear. He delighted in the *whine* he got out of Harrington at that, at the way he felt the cock under him give a *jolt* to let him know how much he liked it, at the way Harrington's hands clenched harder in his hair like he was trying to pull him and the pleasure he brought that much closer. He had the absent thought that their movements were *definitely* going to leave skid marks on the floor with their shoes, but he pushed it away in favor of more pleasurable thoughts – namely, how he could get Harrington to make *that* noise again.

"This..." Harrington gasped out, hands spasming in Billy's hair, "This is a bad idea."

Billy stopped lavishing Harrington's neck with attention, pulled his head back to stare down at Harrington's flushed face, kiss-reddened lips, pupils blown wide with want. Harrington's hands loosened their grip

in Billy's hair, fell to rest on his shoulders instead, but he didn't seem like he really *wanted* to stop; he already looked like he regretted saying anything.

Billy grinned down at him, not pulling their bottom halves away from each other but forcing himself not to move before he was given clear consent to do so.

"Maybe," he drawled in response. "You gonna let that stop you?"

Harrington blinked at him, looking a little dazed with pleasure and taking a moment to honestly think about Billy's question. Billy was pretty sure he knew the answer already, but he was still relieved when a moment later, Harrington's hands went back to the hair at the back of Billy's neck, and he felt the body underneath him tighten for a moment before he found himself suddenly rolled over on his back, Harrington the one over him this time.

"*Hell*, no," Harrington groaned feverishly, and a moment later he was harshly attacking Billy's lips with his own.

Notes for the Chapter:

That basketball scene was one of the first scenes I thought of and I loved writing it. I love the competitiveness.

Also I have no idea what Peter Ballard will be like in ST4, but it was a nice cameo to throw in there. He's not going to be super important to the story, but he will come back. ;)

Hope y'all liked it - let me know! Thank you for reading!

4. Chapter 4

Summary for the Chapter:

“Hargrove,” Henderson said, looking surprised that Billy apparently wasn’t.

“How can I help you, Henderson?” Billy offered, sighing mentally. At least it didn’t *seem* like the guy was here to kill him – that would be a pretty awful strategy, letting Billy see him in the first place.

“We need to talk about Steve,” Henderson said seriously.

It wasn’t often that Billy got out on his own, without his security around him. After he’d ditched them the week before, he would’ve thought that Jane or even Heather would’ve insisted on tightened security, but life progressed the same as always. Billy wasn’t sure whether that meant his people were slacking, or they’d given up when he got an idea into his head, but he couldn’t say he was altogether displeased by the development.

He celebrated his surely temporary reprieve by going to the flea markets early Sunday afternoon. It probably wasn’t exactly what anyone else would consider a reward, but he liked how big the market was, how he could put on some jeans and a leather jacket and enjoy the semi-anonymity it brought him. There were always at least a couple of people who recognized him, but they didn’t often make a big deal of it, and by and large he was left to his own devices.

He chatted with some of the stall owners, flirted with several of them with practiced moves and lines he’d practiced as a teenager and that he had only perfected as he got older. He had always been known as one of the more *easygoing* mafia family heads, and it had more to do with his flattery and penchant for flirting than any sort of kindness. He was known for being a generous lover to those he got into bed with him – men and women alike and everyone in between. It went a long way toward getting people who wouldn’t otherwise be connected to the German mafia be loyal to him, so he kept it up.

Also, it was fun.

He bought a necklace off of Juanita, gifted her a pear he'd gotten off of Renaldo that she had a fondness for, gifted the necklace to Britney and bought a painted lacquer box which he then gave to Mohammad, and he gave him a kiss that tasted like curry from Raj's food stand. It was a fun way to spend the afternoon, and he was just thinking he would go track down Greta's grilled cheese truck when he felt suddenly that he was being watched.

Billy had learned to trust his instincts regarding these kinds of things, so he looked around casually, like he was looking for something specific among the stalls, and his eyes passed right over a familiar form.

He didn't let on that he'd noticed, but he did turn and walk to the exit, figuring that the man would follow if it was something important. He didn't really think he was in danger, but still he was leery at being followed when he didn't know the reason why.

It was as he turned the corner and the flea market disappeared from view that Henderson caught up to him, walking right next to him rather than behind him. He was dressed similarly casual as Billy, with jeans and a tee shirt in an unfortunate shade of green.

"Hargrove," Henderson said, looking surprised that Billy apparently wasn't.

"How can I help you, Henderson?" Billy offered, sighing mentally. At least it didn't *seem* like the guy was here to kill him – that would be a pretty awful strategy, letting Billy see him in the first place.

"We need to talk about Steve," Henderson said seriously.

Billy raised an eyebrow at him. "Harrington?"

"No – Steve Rogers, Captain America," Henderson said sarcastically. Billy rolled his eyes, because his question had been more to prod him along to get to the point – not to clarify what the subject matter was. "Look, everyone knows you're something of a lothario, alright? And whatever, no judgment here, so long as everyone is consenting."

“Of course,” Billy said, offended despite himself at the implication that he would *force* someone. “The hell does this have to do with Harrington?”

Henderson gave him a flat look. “It’s obvious that you want to add him as another notch in your – *very* long bedpost. But that would be a very *stupid* idea – it’s not just you two who would be affected by it when it inevitably went south. So do yourself and everyone *else* a favor, and just keep it in your pants.”

“Awfully big words for someone who refused position as head of your family,” Billy tilted his head. “You don’t trust Harrington to be a big boy and tell *him* this instead of me?”

“I’ve already told Steve all this,” Henderson dismissed, apparently unbothered that Billy knew about the whole thing with who would inherit the Harrington empire. Billy wasn’t sure what to think about that. “But he’s stubborn and also a little dumb, so I don’t think it will really do anything. So *you* need to be the responsible one here and just...not let on that you want to bang him, I guess.” He grimaced at that, likely shoving away the involuntary mental image his words brought him.

Billy ran his tongue along his top lip as he thought on Henderson’s words. Clearly the guy didn’t know about the hookup at the gym. Billy didn’t know why he would’ve thought that Harrington would tell anyone else; he certainly hadn’t let on his activities when Max had asked him, either. It wasn’t so much that he was ashamed of it – he just didn’t want to invite the drama that would surely occur if anyone in his family found out just *how* close they’d come in their alliance.

Despite the temptation to pop Henderson’s bubble, Billy refrained from admitting that they’d already hooked up days before.

“I’ll keep that in mind,” he said instead.

Henderson looked slightly defeated as he glanced over at him. “All that’s not going to stop you at all, is it?”

Billy gave him a grin. “We’ll see,” he said, and then turned another

corner, parting ways with the other man.

“Asshole,” he heard the guy mutter under his breath, but he didn’t follow after Billy, knowing that it would be futile to convince him of anything at this point.

Billy’s grin dropped once he knew he was being left alone again. He had carefully not thought of that night at the gym since it had occurred, because it hadn’t really cleared anything up between him and Harrington. After it was done, Billy had still been panting and recovering from his frankly amazing orgasm when Harrington had risen to his feet, saying that he would look into who might be the rat (it had taken a moment for Billy to remember their previous conversation to understand what Harrington was talking about) and then he’d made his way out of the gym without a glance back.

Billy wasn’t sure how to take it. He wasn’t used to being the one left behind, confused and feeling a little used. He didn’t want to jeopardize anything with their plans either though, so he stopped himself from chasing after the guy to demand an explanation, or to try bedding him again. (Or – flooring? Could it really be called “bedding” him if they did it on the ground?)

Billy had never been ashamed of himself for enjoying sex so much – even when Neil had tried to literally “straighten” him out, Billy had just been more careful to hide from Neil that his date Veronica’d had a dick or that the redness on his neck wasn’t an allergic reaction to a brand of lipstick or some shit but was beard burn and bite marks. He liked the short-term intimacy that came with fucking, and most people he slept with understood that it wasn’t long term. (He tried very hard to make that clear from the beginning, after a couple of unfortunate incidents as a teenager had left him feeling like a bigger asshole than normal.)

The thing was, usually once Billy fucked someone he lost interest. The chase was over, he’d accomplished his goal, and there were so many others to set his sights on next. But – and this was definitely a surprise to Billy – he still *wanted* Harrington. Still felt his pulse quicken when he thought about him, the feel of his body pressed into his and the wandering hands and the look of focused intent when he stared at Billy beneath him, like he was absorbing every microcosm

of expression while Billy lost himself to the pleasure.

And it wasn't that it had been unsatisfying – no, Billy was actually surprised that something so simple had been so thrilling. They hadn't even removed their pants, just touching each other over the fabric like they were teenagers just learning what they could do with their bodies to feel good. And while it wasn't necessarily the *best* sex he'd ever had, Billy had blown his load like they were actually fucking each other for real. And then Harrington had left before Billy had even recovered enough to make a quip, or talk about the ramifications of what they'd just done.

Maybe that was it, Billy supposed. Everyone else he'd ever fucked, both parties had known going in what they were getting themselves into, so there was no confusion when the act was done. He didn't usually ever see them again, either.

But Harrington was the head of another mafia, and he'd never fucked with someone that high up in the food chain before. It would cause complications and drama because they would see each other any time some problem came up, so Billy had kept himself away. (Not that it was all that hard to do – most other mafia heads were old men who had liked his dad when he'd been leading the German mafia, had disliked him because he was loud and outspoken in ways not seen as fitting for someone of his station – not when he wasn't the family head yet.) Billy had never expected that Harrington would *return* his desire, even only for the short term, and with their families being allied he didn't know how to go forward.

Did he pretend nothing happened? It seemed that's the route that Harrington had decided to take, because he hadn't reached out to him since then. Billy hadn't either, but Harrington was the one who had left first so he figured it would be clear that Harrington would be the one to take the lead on how they should interact going forward. Billy was nobody's bitch; he wasn't going to go chasing after the guy just because the thought of what his fingers might be able to do made his blood quicken.

Maybe he wasn't done with Harrington yet though, he considered. Henderson clearly thought that there was reason to be concerned about anything going on; considering the fact that it had been over a

week since they'd hooked up and Henderson had only approached him *now* would suggest that Harrington at least talked about Billy enough since then and in a way to get his consigliere concerned. The thought sent a thrill of smugness through him, but he pushed it aside because he wasn't going to be the one to go after Harrington this time. He'd done it last time – it wasn't his turn, and the thought was juvenile (especially ridiculous considering the subject content) but he wasn't going to be sharing his thoughts with anyone so whatever.

He reached Greta's grilled cheese truck a few minutes later – she was parked in a courtyard set aside specifically for food trucks, with a couple of tables in the center for people to sit at and eat. He let his eyes wander, taking in the other trucks and what they offered, but honestly the grilled cheese looked the most appealing.

He stopped though when he saw a familiar figure by the falafel truck, this one a lot more appealing than the one Henderson presented.

He walked up behind the man just as he was taking his falafel balls – not even in a sandwich or wrap, like a *heathen* – and cleared his throat. "You following me now?"

Harrington turned quickly, looking honestly startled to see Billy there before his expression smoothed out. "I was here first," he said, raising an eyebrow and stepping out of the way of the next person going to get their food.

"And I was first at the flea market," Billy said dryly. Harrington's expression went confused – not a lot, like he didn't want to let on that he didn't know what Billy was talking about, but just enough for Billy to figure that the guy honestly didn't know about Henderson tracking him down to give him a weird version of the shovel talk.

"Henderson thinks I'm going to cause problems between our families," Billy explained, walking side by side with Harrington toward one of the empty tables, keeping his choice of words carefully vague in case of listening ears. Knowing that someone had tried to set them on each other recently made him much more leery of anyone who might be watching, blending in.

Harrington looked further confused as he settled onto the bench on

one side of the table, opposite to Billy, and bit into his food. “He was fine with our alliance before – why would he be against it now?”

Billy gave him a look, leaning over and casually snatching one of Harrington’s falafel balls out of the paper with his fingers. “It wasn’t our *alliance* that he was talking about.” Deliberately, he placed the entire ball in his mouth, keeping eye contact with Harrington the whole time.

The confusion fled from Harrington’s face immediately, a flush rising on his cheeks and pupils dilating as he watched Billy slowly and meaningfully lick the tahini sauce off his index finger and then his thumb. He coughed lightly into his fist and shifted in his seat, and a curl of wicked delight arose in Billy at the reaction he could get out of the other man.

“Right,” Harrington said, sounding distracted, his gaze flicking from Billy’s mouth to his fingers to his own plate of falafel in front of him. A moment later, he regretfully (to Billy, at least) collected himself, expression smoothing over into the more familiar blankness Billy had come to recognize, only the pink on his neck revealing that he was still thinking about it. “I didn’t tell anyone – figured it would be best to keep something like that from our respective sides.”

“I figured as much, pretty boy,” Billy drawled, and, emboldened by Harrington’s reactions to the overtness of his actions, he immediately forgot about his resolve to let Harrington be the one to make the next move. He reached over the table again and swiped a finger through some of the tahini sauce pooled at the bottom of Harrington’s food before licking a stripe up that finger, from knuckle to tip. Harrington watched, biting the inside of his lip and clearly struggling with himself as Billy slowly inserted that same finger into his mouth before drawing it out just as slowly, now slickened with spit, practically fellating it right there in public, in front of man and God himself.

Harrington’s breathing was noticeably heavier than before, pupils blown wide as he stared at Billy, face flushed and reddened once again and hands clenched in loose fists on top of the table, like he was having to hold himself back from reaching across the table to yank Billy to him, to shove him to his knees and force his cock down

his throat. The idea of it sent a thrill through Billy, a long-suppressed desire to hand over that kind of control to someone else rising up before he ruthlessly squashed it down.

“You alright there, Harrington?” Billy asked him innocently, resting his hands in his lap as though nothing were amiss. He tilted his head a little, taking in the flushed cheeks and wondering how far down that blush spread. If he didn’t know any better, he would think the guy was inexperienced, that he was reacting to Billy so strongly because just imagining the things Billy was wordlessly suggesting was so new and fresh to him that he didn’t know how to handle it. But he remembered the decisiveness, the *confidence* that had filled Harrington’s frame at the gym – it was a learned one, one that couldn’t be faked. Harrington was no more innocent in sexual pleasures than Billy was. It was then somehow *more* endearing that he could still react so strongly to the mere suggestion of sexual acts.

Harrington took a careful breath, before giving him a little glare that only made Billy’s lips twitch, fighting against his attempts to keep his expression placid.

“I have a hotel,” Harrington said abruptly, and Billy raised an eyebrow at the non-sequitur.

“Yeah, you have a chain of ‘em,” he agreed.

“I have a *room*, one I live at,” Harrington clarified. “It’s private – no one else will show up there.” He tilted his head, smirked a little. “The bed is more comfortable than a polished wooden floor.”

It was a bad idea – Billy knew that already. A bed made things more personal, the invitation to go somewhere else made it more commitment than a convenient fuck like it had been on the basketball court. The other man was dangerous, just like him – whatever happened was doomed to blow up in their faces.

He remembered his words to Harrington the week before – “*You gonna let that stop you?*”

Billy had the same answer as Harrington did last time. He returned the smirk in kind, blood pumping faster with excitement as he rose to

his feet. "Lead the way, pretty boy."

Harrington let himself fall to the side, back down to the bed so that he didn't squish Billy as he recovered. He panted heavily, apparently uncaring that he was getting come on his blankets as he rolled onto his side, facing Billy with half his face shrouded in his pillow. Billy didn't say anything about it, breathing carefully until he was no longer seeing spots in his vision.

His fingertips were still tingling when he reached over and sort of slapped at Harrington's bare stomach with the back of his hand – not meant to hurt, but more like a tired, congratulatory pat to get his attention.

"You're good at that, Harrington," he breathed.

Harrington snorted cutely into his pillow. "Thanks, I've had a lot of practice," he said dryly. He licked his lips. "You know, after I've had my hand on your dick and your tongue in my mouth, I think you can just call me Steve."

"And what *fine* hands they are," Billy flirted, sending him a crooked grin. It was true; Harrington – *Steve* – knew exactly how to move his fingers, how to twist his wrist and tighten his grip with a timely precision that brought more pleasure than Billy might have expected out of something as simple as a handjob. He'd never expected to have a ring kink either, but when Harrington used his right hand, the feel of the signet ring he always wore warming quickly as it dragged over the soft skin of his cock had sent his arousal ratcheting up higher and faster than he could ever remember it doing before. Luckily Harrington knew what he looked like now when he was close, and he'd slowed his strokes enough that Billy's orgasm had been held off before he could blow his load embarrassingly quickly.

(Of course, it might not have been the ring that did it, but more what the ring represented, a reminder of who Steve was even in a situation like this, and something about the vulnerability that Billy allowed and the danger inherent in their respective identities just made the whole thing hotter. But that idea would suggest that Billy wanted to

be...*submissive*, and to *Steve Harrington*, so he pushed the thought away.)

Steve huffed a laugh through his nose at Billy's flirting, watching him with something Billy couldn't identify present in his eyes. "You're not so bad yourself, Hargrove."

"Hey man, this goes both ways," Billy teased. "I call you Steve, you gotta call me Billy."

Steve hummed in agreement, but didn't say anything, just blinking at him with his huge brown eyes that Billy felt privileged to have seen go glassy with pleasure not minutes before and yet were no less appealing looking soft like this. Something like fondness shivered somewhere in his chest, and he quickly pulled his eyes away, because he needed to remember that this was just fucking, and Harrington wasn't exactly a good guy.

Abruptly he remembered that this was Steve's room – the guy was probably waiting for him to leave, and if he wasn't then Billy needed to leave anyway.

He heaved himself upright and to his feet, pausing to use the corner of the blanket to wipe the cooling come and lube off his stomach and his chest, because if Steve was going to get his mess on the blankets he figured it didn't matter if he did too.

"Leaving so soon?" Steve pouted as Billy pulled his jeans back on from where they'd been abandoned next to the bed. Billy was pretty sure he imagined the disappointment that flitted across the other's face as he pulled his shoes back on.

"Yeah, I'm not really one for cuddling," Billy said, a lighthearted, easy way to make the boundaries clear between them. As he pulled his shirt on he told himself that this should be the end of it – he'd been to bed with Harrington, they'd seen each other naked, and it would be a bad idea to let it go any further.

"I suppose that rules out another round, then," Steve hummed, and Billy glanced over to see him stretching, practically putting himself on display with a teasing look in his eye, hand ruffling through his

hair like he'd already figured out Billy's feelings on it – which he honestly probably had.

“You’re a fiend,” Billy huffed, mouth curving in an unwilling smile. He went to the table he’d deposited his gun on top of, grabbing it to shove back in his waistband. He paused though, noticing now that he was closer to the table, that the drawer, cracked open from where Steve had grabbed the lube earlier, looked more shallow than it should.

“A sexy one,” Harrington agreed behind him, and Billy hummed absently, thinking more on the fact that he was certain that there was a false bottom in that drawer, and he definitely wanted to have a look at what Harrington was hiding. But he couldn’t exactly let on that he’d noticed his secret hiding spot, because then the man might change it – or worse.

Perhaps hooking up with the guy would be the best decision he’d ever made, Billy pondered. Because he suddenly knew that he *needed* to get into that drawer, to see what was so secret that Harrington would hide it even in the privacy of his own bedroom.

He would have turned back to the bed, taken Steve up on his roundabout offer for another round, but he had already made to leave and changing his mind now would be suspicious no matter the reason. Billy was practically renowned for his stubbornness, so capitulating so quickly would definitely be odd.

So, he turned around, flashing a smile at the man still laid out on the bed watching him get his things, and walked over to him. He leaned down, curling a hand around the back of his neck and pressing a promising kiss to his still reddened lips, to which Steve immediately returned.

“Next time,” Billy murmured against his lips, only a hair’s breadth away.

Then he straightened, winking in response to Harrington’s pleased smile, and walked out the door.

Finding a chance to snoop without Harrington's knowledge was difficult.

Oh, the sleeping together bit – that was fine. Easy. Billy thought that some part of him should feel worse about fucking a man with zero morals, someone who saw people as no more than tools for him to bend and use and throw away at will. And there was a little part of him that did, he supposed, but the sex was hot and when Steve looked at him with some type of look that seemed to be fondness and maybe regret but mostly pleasure, Billy didn't remember all the bad things he knew about the other man. Just for a little bit, he just let himself enjoy the closeness.

Not that they'd actually had – you know. Real sex. Billy wasn't sure whether he was more leery of actually going through with something like that or if Harrington was, but both of them seemed to be under a silent, personal resolution that they would stick to just mouths and hands at this point. Billy wasn't sure why Steve would be holding back, but he wasn't going to look a gift horse in the mouth. He just needed to get close enough that he could get a look in that drawer.

It didn't happen immediately, though. Upon reflection, Billy figured he should've expected that it would take some time for the other man to grow comfortable enough – *complacent* enough – to have no problem leaving Billy in the room alone. Billy didn't want to risk going snooping while Harrington was sleeping just a couple of feet away; he didn't know how light of a sleeper he might be and he didn't want to be caught if he happened to wake up right in the middle of it. So he had to wait for Harrington to leave him alone for something.

He started hooking up with Harrington once a week, which devolved into a couple of times a week, and then every other day. He pretended to be softening along with Steve, to be letting his walls down and show fondness and growing affection, and told himself that it was *definitely* all pretend.

He wished things didn't have to be this way. He wished that Harrington was a good man – that *Billy* was a good man. He wished they didn't have the history of their families forcing the way they interacted, the way that he always had to keep the alliance in mind

so that he didn't do anything to fuck it up and cause a war. He wished they were just two normal guys, maybe working in the same office, or having gone to high school together – just two people who could have some kind of relationship without hiding behind secrets and family and loyalties.

Max knew about what Billy was doing now – she had to. She had asked him – demanded, really – after the fourth time Billy and Harrington had hooked up, just what exactly was the plan here now because things seemed to be stagnating with the alliance and they had no new information. Billy had confessed how he and Harrington were fucking, had been since the night at the gym (which he *had* told her about – mostly). At the time Max had called him an idiot and rolled her eyes, but hadn't objected to how Billy was using his body as a distraction, as a way to get closer to the other mafia head. The next day Jane had looked amused, and Billy had known immediately that Max had told her the situation. All told, he figured amusement wasn't too bad of a reaction – it could've been worse, really.

Now though, Max wasn't so keen on the plan.

"It's been almost three months since we've created an alliance with the Harrington family," Max told him one night, just her and Billy in his room. Billy was looking over his notes, as well as what little information Kali and Robin had managed to glean from their time on the other side. Most of it was rumors, nothing concrete.

"Congrats, you can count days," Billy said absently, scribbling a star next to one section so he would review that one later in more detail.

He could practically feel the force of Max's scowl across the room. "It's been *three months*," she repeated pointedly. "How many times have you guys fucked? And you still haven't gotten anything useful."

"Your point?" Billy challenged without glancing up.

"My *point* – are you still going after Harrington? Do you have some other theory you just haven't told me, or has your dick decided that he's not a bad guy after all and you're making excuses?"

Billy looked up at his sister with a glare, and she glared back,

unintimidated as she stood with arms folded across her chest. “No,” he said darkly. “I legitimately have not had the chance to look in the drawer without him knowing. *You* try fucking the secrets out of someone.” He paused. “Actually, don’t. I’m doing just fine – but it *takes time*, Maxine.”

“Speed it up,” Max retorted. “And try not to be so excited when you’re going to meet up with him.”

Billy said nothing as she turned and left, not quite slamming the door behind her, because he could see how it looked on the outside. But it wasn’t like he could share the details of what they were doing, of how Billy was moving them forward, because at this point it was literally just sex. Any attempt at hinting that Billy suspected some of Harrington’s more *unsavory* activities were met with either a blank stare or a look so nuanced that Billy couldn’t accurately describe it if he tried, but made *Billy* feel like he was the one in the wrong. He would just need to get a look at whatever Harrington was hiding.

He would be very disappointed if it turned out to be nothing more than some weird sex toys.

(Yeah. Definitely disappointed.)

Some parts of Billy’s job were rather easy, when it came down to it. Anyone looking in from the outside thought that *everything* about being a mafia boss was easy, because they had so many people to do their bidding and had so much money. His job was a coveted one.

But at the risk of sounding like a poor little rich boy, there were many downsides to it – one of them being the lack of anonymity, the way he always had to be careful and watchful of his actions, or the way he couldn’t really make real friends without doing extensive background checks, because there would *always* be people out to kill him. He had a very small circle of people he trusted completely, and as such the life could get rather lonely at times.

But there *were* easy parts to his job, and one of them was in sniffing out people who might be more willing to ally themselves with his

family than they let on.

There were various ways to do this, and just about every mafia boss and higher-up had at least one or two go-to methods. His own father had worked through fear, John Harrington worked through strategically placed spies, the Poles drew people to them naturally as the strongest, oldest mafia in the city.

Billy's method was more physical, and more akin to something he himself liked, and that was the physical pleasure and satiation that came with being known as a lothario. People let down their guard because they thought that all he cared about was sex and pretty people, thought that there wasn't much going on above the shoulders. Especially when contrasted with his father's method of running his businesses, he seemed like a careless playboy who just happened to have inherited the German empire on his father's death. It left him underestimated a lot, so that he could get information out of people before they even had the thought that it was a secret that they ought to keep to themselves.

As such, he was a frequent attendee at several known strip clubs and escort services across the greater Chicago area. He'd been coming to them since he was a teenager, before it was technically legal but no one really wanted to deny the one who would inherit the rule of the large German mafia, and by now even the other mafia-owned establishments didn't have a problem with his attendance, as he didn't appear to have done anything objectionable in the meantime. They thought he was just there for the shows or for the sex, which was fine by Billy.

And he did have fun, when he went to these places, because he hadn't come to be known as an unapologetic Casanova by *accident*. Sometimes he left with only the physical satiation one would expect at these sorts of places, but other times he left armed with new knowledge about other mafias that he might not have gotten otherwise.

The woman he had paid handsomely to spend time with was Malaysian, pretty, with long legs and olive-toned skin, and *maybe* in her early twenties, though he doubted it. She told him to call her Dove, but the chances of that being her real name were slim. He had

bought her a drink at the bar downstairs that she had taken only a sip of before she had taken him up to a room upstairs.

It wasn't long before clothes were off, and they were tumbling into the bed, and Billy was into it until he saw finger-shaped bruises around wrists previously covered by the long sleeves of her dress.

He knew that johns could be rough sometimes, and sometimes the escorts were even into it – but their bosses should have been attentive and understanding enough that in such cases, whatever happened, an escort shouldn't be going back to work before the bruises were healed.

And he didn't want to presume that Dove was unwilling in her prostitution, because he'd made that mistake before and gotten schooled for it, but he didn't want to assume either that just because Dove had invited him up to her room that she *wanted* to do anything with him.

So he just pulled back from lipstick stained lips, and with an almost teasing sort of smile, he lightly traced his fingers over the bruises on her wrists, saying, "Looks like someone's been a *bad girl*."

He watched her expression intently, looking for whether or not he should push forward or pull back, and his fears were confirmed when he saw the *fear* that flashed through her eyes, the resignation as she moved her hands to close around the back of his neck to bring him closer.

"Yes," she moaned breathily against his mouth, her hips lifting to grind against him, and if Billy hadn't seen the quick expressions in her eyes a moment ago he might have been fooled into thinking that she was actually into it. "Yes, Mr. Hargrove, I've been *so bad*. Are you going to *punish* me?"

Billy knew from the devices he always brought with him in these sorts of situations where he was coming into another family's establishment that there were no bugs or cameras in the room; he would've been alerted within seconds if there had been. So, he was confident that no one was watching as he moved off of her, her hands dropping from his neck as he rolled onto his back beside her.

“Mr. Hargrove?” Dove said, voice threaded with uncertainty as she sat up, long hair spilling over her shoulder as she looked down at him. “Did I displease you?”

Billy waved a hand, sitting up in the bed and looking at her from a perspective closer to eye-to-eye. “No, honey, you’re fine,” he assured her. “Don’t worry, I’m not going to tell your boss, or anyone else. I do have a reputation for taking a while in the bedroom though, so we’ll have to hang out together for a little longer here.”

Dove blinked at him, a hand coming up to tug lightly at the ends of her hair. “I don’t understand,” she admitted.

“I like bed partners who want to be there as much as I do,” Billy said plainly, and shook his head at her sudden look of panic. “It’s okay, I don’t blame you. You’re not the only one I’ve gotten alone who doesn’t want to be there. And I know it’s not because of who *I* am, but rather because you really don’t like your job.”

Dove began to look a little indignant, even as she tugged the bed’s blankets over her lap. “Mr. Manetsch is a good boss...”

“He’s a good *mafia* boss,” Billy gently corrected. “That doesn’t make him a good man.”

Dove stiffened. “And I suppose you would consider yourself a *good man*?” she said sarcastically.

“The girls who work for me don’t do it out of fear, at least,” Billy said calmly, because he’d had this conversation enough times that he could generally predict where it was going to go and how the other person was going to react.

“I’m not *afraid*,” Dove started, eyes flashing, but the arms wrapped around her midsection betrayed her lie.

“Good,” Billy interrupted her. “You don’t have to be – not with me, at least.”

Dove’s lips twisted, but it was more out of searching for the words to say than anger; she was confused and lost, but it wasn’t like Billy had anywhere else to be.

“You’re the boss of the German family,” she finally said, not looking at him, clutching the blanket to her chest like it was some sort of protection. “I’ve heard stories about you, from the other girls.”

“All good things, I hope,” Billy grinned at her, ruffling his hair back from his face.

Dove shrugged a little. “People disappear, around you,” she said, and then flinched like she expected him to immediately strike out at her for her words, a look of regret appearing on her face like she wanted to take back the statement.

And Billy...really hadn’t expected that. He was confused, at the implication behind her words, that he killed people or kidnapped them or whatever it was she was suggesting – but then after a moment he understood. He hadn’t realized that some of those disappearances had been blamed on him, or that there had been no retaliation if someone thought he was killing off the associates of another family.

“They do,” he said in an intentionally light voice. “I have connections all over, high and low. Sometimes people want out of their situations, and I’m in the business of getting them out of them. I don’t care where they came from.” He flicked his eyes over her meaningfully.

Dove blinked at him, understanding dawning and with it coming stunned disbelief. “You...you want to help me – *out*?”

“If you *want* out,” Billy agreed. “It would mean setting up a new life somewhere else, likely outside of Illinois altogether, new identity and all.”

“I’m pretty used to changing into a new identity, in this business,” Dove said wryly, and then looked at him trepidatiously, skeptically. “You said it’s a business though. What would something like that cost me?”

Billy smiled a little, knowing he already had her in all but the actual words of agreement. “Nothing major,” he assured her. “I’m really in the information trading business. I’ve found that sex workers know a lot because people are idiots about what they let slip when they think

you're not important."

Dove's eyes lit with realization, suddenly. "You planned this, didn't you?"

Billy raised an eyebrow; she was smarter than she let on, smarter than he'd honestly expected, since she was picking up on that already. "Maybe," he drawled, not quite answering. "That change anything?"

Dove watched him for a moment, and then shook her head, curls bouncing a little with the movement. "No," she decided. "What sort of information do you want?"

Billy tilted his head. "What have you heard about the Italians? And more specifically, about Steve Harrington's businesses?"

Billy and Steve had been hooking up for three months to the day – not that Billy kept track or anything. He wondered if he ought to make mention of the day – did it count as an anniversary when it was just sex, without the relationship? He didn't know. He'd never fucked the same person this much in his *life*, let alone been in any kind of relationship with someone. Neil wouldn't have allowed the type of relationship Billy craved, and after Billy became his own boss no one had been special enough to catch his eye.

Not that Harrington was special. Billy was just using him, and there were no feelings involved there. Sex was just the best way to get close to him, to get what he needed.

Steve had finished blowing Billy almost twenty minutes ago, and Billy was trying not to think about the fact that Steve's hands, holding him around his hips and *forcing* him not to move and just take whatever *Steve* decided to give him as he went down on him, slowing down and speeding up at his own will – it had almost been more arousing than the actual mouth providing wet heat around his dick.

He was a mafia boss. When he'd been younger, he'd been the boss'

kid. He'd never had anyone know that and didn't immediately lie down, belly up, so to speak. They had all gone submissive, letting him take control, regardless of which parts were inserted into whom.

And Billy *had* genuinely liked those times. Sex had never been a chore for him – far from it. But he had assumed that when he hooked up with Harrington, that it would be nothing more than usual, that Billy would be the one taking control, being bossy and directing Harrington exactly what to do so that *both* of them would get the most pleasure.

He hadn't expected Steve's form of quiet control. He hadn't expected, that first night, to be the one underneath, to go along with Harrington's kisses and touches and cede control to him. He hadn't even really *noticed*, to be honest, how pliant he had gone as soon as Steve had grabbed him and rolled them over. Not until later. Not until the next time they'd met, and then gone to Steve's room, and he realized as he'd lied there on the bed that while they each had their hands on each others' dicks, Harrington was the one who was leading them, was controlling when Billy would have his orgasm. And he might have gone on the defensive if the man hadn't been so *good* at it. He'd told himself that this was *not* the new normal, that he'd take control next time.

And he'd tried. Sort of. He'd capitulated rather quickly, he reflected, because Steve *was* good at sex, and he knew how to get Billy ticking toward arousal and orgasm more surely than anyone else ever had. There was this odd coolness on Harrington's face when he took control, a sort of assessment that was very similar to how he'd looked when they'd been in talks about an alliance, in the beginning, and the man had been weighing out the pros and cons, had been evaluating the truthfulness behind Billy's words as he'd made their case.

But this assessment wasn't cold, it wasn't – cruel. There's nothing critical about his gaze, just a focused intent, like he's looking for those flashes of expression that will tell him what Billy likes best, without Billy having to say it, and he will provide. Billy hadn't expected such a despicable man to care so much about his partner's pleasure in the bedroom, but he's not complaining.

He *is* concerned though, what it might mean for him. He'd never

thought he was submissive before, and now he's letting this other mafia head take control – one that he doesn't trust in the slightest.

(He *wants* to trust him. He wants to believe that Steve isn't the man Billy thinks he is, that all the signs he's seen in the past couple of years have been misdirects. But that would be a childish dream, and he didn't get this far by being self-indulgent.)

He was pulled from his thoughts by Steve's groan next to him as he sat up in the bed. "I'm gonna grab a shower," he announced, and Billy's heart leaped. "You wanna join me?"

Billy sat up, leaned over to kiss the salacious grin off his lips. "Better plan," he proposed, pretending his grin was satisfaction for finally being able to see in that drawer and not because Steve was so cute attractive, "How about you go first, make sure you wash yourself *thoroughly*"—he tapped his fingers against the top of the swell of Steve's ass, so that he understood his meaning—"and when I come to join you, you'll act surprised when I turn you around and drop to my knees."

Billy pulled back, saw Steve's pupils swallowing up the irises, but there was no embarrassed flush; just heated promise and a smile filled of lust and excitement.

"Solid plan," Steve agreed, and leaned over to kiss Billy again quickly before climbing off the bed, going to the en suite and closing the door behind him.

Billy's grin dropped as soon as the door was closed, but he stayed in the bed and waited until he heard the shower turn on before he rose to his feet.

It felt weird to just walk around completely in the buff in someone else's room, so he paused to drag his underwear on before he went to the table. The drawer opened immediately and easily, and he saw a few miscellaneous items inside – a flashlight, an almost-empty bottle of lube, some takeout menus, a pad of Post-Its, a pack of gum, a spare phone charger, a couple of pens, and a bottle of Tums. He ignored all of it, set the things on top of the table instead, and felt around the drawer for some mechanism to pull up the false bottom.

He found it after several passes, a small knob on the underside that he had to slide away from him like a dial, and then the bottom of the drawer inside sprang up with a soft click. Heart racing, he pulled the wood up and set it next to the flashlight on top of the desk.

It was – not immediately apparent what he was looking at. There was a small-ish stack of papers, and a black wallet at the very back – so thin he was pretty sure it was empty, not sure why Harrington bothered to hide his spare wallet like some kind of secret. Not sure why the cheap silver pendant with the one he was pretty sure was Saint Anthony sat coiled like something precious right beside the wallet. He ignored them, reaching in instead for the papers, eyes scanning over the numbers and letters listed there, trying to figure out their meaning.

001 – NJ623 – AAR15YOFBHBE56H154W – SVO202

002 – NJ623 – AAR12YOFBHBE52H117W – SVO202

003 – IN197 – WR8YOFRHBE45H68W – SVO202

004 – NY62 – OPIR10YOMBHBE53H98W – SVO202

005 – NY71 – WR9YOMBLHBLE45H82W – SVO202

There were more on the list, but Billy didn't understand no matter how much farther down he went, so he flipped to the next page, kept flipping until he got past the lists he didn't understand, and saw a black and white photo. It was photocopied; a missing persons flyer. He glanced over it, trying to understand why this would be hidden in the drawer.

Alexis Williams, fifteen years old. Last seen in Newark, New Jersey with younger sister. Black hair, brown eyes, 5'6", 154 lb. Call 911 if spotted.

Billy flipped to the next page – *Jamaica Williams, twelve years old. Last seen in Newark, New Jersey with older sister. Black hair, brown eyes, 5'2", 117 lb. Call 911 if spotted.* – and he was about to go to the next one when he stopped. Froze.

He went back to the first page in the stack, held it next to the missing persons flyers. NJ623 – NJ was probably for New Jersey, but he

didn't know what the 623 stood for. But AA – African American. 15YO – fifteen years old. F – female. BHBE – black hair, brown eyes.

He flipped quickly through the papers, finding the other flyers and matching them up with codes on the list. Not every line of code had a flyer, but every flyer had a code, and Billy felt his heart sinking even as it began to pound faster in his fury.

He was right. Dammit, he was right all along, and he'd tried to forget it or hope it would go away, hope that it wouldn't be true, but this was clear evidence right here. He didn't know the whole code, but he knew enough, and it all added up to one fact: Harrington's mafia was indeed running a human trafficking ring.

So caught up in his findings and his anger and betrayal, he hadn't been paying attention to his surroundings. He didn't notice the bathroom door opening again, the sound of the still-running shower getting louder without the barrier. He didn't notice the footsteps behind him, so focused on examining the code and the flyers of those poor kids that everything else around him was forgotten.

He did have an instinctive reaction to a particular sound, though. It was familiar, one he'd heard often growing up, the smallest of warning sounds before the storm. It was the sound of the safety being clicked off of a gun.

He whirled around immediately, still holding the papers in his hands, and saw Steve standing behind him, just out of reach, pistol pointed straight at his chest. The look in his eyes was cold and stony – nothing like the fondness he normally saw, that he hadn't realized was there until it was gone. He was no longer just Steve – he was the head of the Italian mafia, unforgiving and decisive as any crime boss should be.

Harrington's eyes flicked down to the papers, then back up at Billy. His eyes were hard like pieces of flint. "I guess you've found me out," he stated.

Notes for the Chapter:

Hehe this is so exciting to write. I hope it's just as

exciting to read!

Love you all <3

5. Chapter 5

Summary for the Chapter:

“Steve!” Dustin sounded much more panicked than Steve would have expected, and he began to have the feeling that Dustin wasn’t concerned after the meeting with Quezada – something else was wrong.

“What – what’s wrong?” he rapped out, back straightening, eyes automatically darting around for sign of trouble, despite not being in the other man’s presence.

“I found the rat!” Dustin said, sounding a little hysterical and a lot panicked.

Notes for the Chapter:

Hello, lovelies! I'm glad you're liking the fic so far; I'm loving writing it! I'm almost done with the next chapter, so in the meantime I hope you can enjoy this one!

Usually, when Billy had a gun pointed at him, he was wearing more clothes. Usually, the one holding the gun was dressed in more than a towel around his waist, too. Usually, they weren’t in a bedroom with clothes slung over the chair and the bottle of lube they’ve used multiple times sitting on the table behind him like some kind of reminder of how many times he’d fucked up in allowing himself to believe, to *hope* that he was wrong about Harrington.

Billy wasn’t thinking about all of that, though – and not just because there was a gun currently pointed at his chest, while he was unarmed. His brain was stuck on the anger instead, the *fury* that he finally had proof that the bastard in front of him was just as cruel as the rumors whispered about his father. He can’t be scared of death when he’s so angry instead.

“Yeah, I found you out,” Billy spat Harrington’s words back at him.

“Not like it was hard to do – we’ve suspected for *years* that something wasn’t right.” He clenched his hands into fists around the papers, crinkling them in his fingers. He wanted to hurt Harrington, wanted to make him angry, so he blurted the first thing that came to mind: “Max told me it would be easy to fuck the secrets out of you – guess she was right.”

Something flickered in Harrington’s eyes, and Billy was infuriated that he *still* couldn’t identify it – the man had so many emotions that he kept so tightly controlled that they were gone before Billy could study them to figure out what he was thinking.

“Back at you,” Harrington said coolly. “I really didn’t expect you to be stupid enough to snoop while I’m *right there*, though.”

“You gonna kill me now, Harrington?” Billy taunted, because apparently he had no self-preservation instincts and his brain was telling him that goading the man with the gun pointed at him was a *great* idea. “It’s not gonna do any good. My people know why we were allying with the Italians, and it won’t be long before they find the proof they need to destroy you.”

An expression crossed over Harrington’s face then, and this time, Billy recognized it – *confusion*. “Proof? How the hell would they destroy *me*?”

Billy sneered at the man’s arrogance. He really was a trip and a half. “You’re a *man*, Harrington; you’re not invincible. And most people don’t exactly take *kindly* to human traffickers.”

Harrington’s mouth dropped open in shock, and he had the audacity to look offended. “You think – *I’m* behind the trafficking ring? *You’re* the one who smuggles them through in your cargo!”

“The hell I do!” Billy shot back, voice rising. “I told you I only smuggle *drugs*, asshole. *You’re* the one who uses your international connections to get people under the radar with your shipping.”

“No I don’t!” Harrington protested.

“Stop lying!” Billy thundered, irately tossing his handful of papers to

the ground. “You’re already going to kill me anyway, what’s it matter? You already admitted that I found you out!”

“I was talking about you finding out that I was after *you*!” Harrington gestured with his gun, looking angry and frustrated. “That’s why I wanted an alliance with you in the first place – my dad didn’t think we should get involved in stopping the trafficking, but *I do*! And you *Germans* are the ones all the evidence points to!”

“That’s why I reached out to *you*!” Billy insisted, throwing his hands up. “Because all the evidence points to *you*!”

Harrington’s mouth dropped open, the angry red fading from his cheeks as he came to a realization just an instant before Billy did. His aim with the gun faltered, but Billy didn’t lunge for it, because he suddenly understood that the man across from him...wasn’t the one he was looking for, after all. And with that being the case, he wasn’t in immediate danger of being shot or otherwise killed, either.

“We’ve been set up,” Harrington said aloud what they were both thinking.

“Jesus Christ, again?” Billy complained bitterly.

A moment later, Harrington raised the gun toward Billy again, expression a little wild and a lot uncertain. Billy stopped, because now he was confused *again*.

“Prove it,” Harrington demanded. “Why should I believe *anything* you have to say when I have a gun pointed at you?”

“Maybe because you *do* have a gun pointed at me,” Billy retorted. “And how the hell am I supposed to prove it? I’ve been trying to find the bastards responsible for *years* and it led me to *you*.”

“Okay, years,” Harrington agreed. “Your bodyguard – Jane. She’ll know. You call her, and tell her to come here, and she can verify your story.”

“Uh, yeah – I don’t think Jane is...” Billy started, but Steve interrupted him before he could finish.

“Do it!” he snapped. “Max is your sister – I don’t trust that she won’t cover for you. Jane is the next logical choice. Call her, and tell her to come here *now*, or I blow your brains out like Kennedy.”

“*Fine*,” Billy sneered, highly aware of Harrington’s gun aimed at him in case he tried making a grab for his gun on the bedside table, while he grabbed his phone from the pocket of his jeans, still abandoned on the floor. “Then, to prove *you’re* telling the truth, call – Myers. Your doctor.”

“My *doctor*?” Harrington repeated, looking confused again. “Why the hell would you pick *him*?”

“Because he’s dating Wheeler, and Wheeler is the one you decided to exchange so he obviously knows the details of your plan, whatever plan it is. Myers has more loyalty to Wheeler than to you, so he’s least likely to lie to save *your* ass, of the people who probably know.”

“Right, I guess that makes sense,” Harrington muttered with a frown, pulling his phone from his pocket.

It was almost exactly thirty minutes later when Billy heard people approaching outside the door. It had been a tense half hour, neither of them really trusting the other and Harrington keeping his gun pointed at him for most of it. He’d only let off when he’d tugged on some clothes, after he’d let Billy do so too, so that their respective allies didn’t have to walk in on them half naked – and not in the fun way. Billy was certain that Jane and Myers would be able to guess what they’d been doing before guns – or, gun, singular – had been drawn and accusations made, but out of sight out of mind, and all that.

Steve opened the door at the soft knocking, and Jane was the first one to walk in – surprisingly accompanied by both Myers *and* Wheeler. She was wearing a black dress with a white skirt, and her hair was pulled back in what Billy was pretty sure was called a French chignon. Myers and Wheeler were in matching black tuxes. They all tensed as soon as they walked in and saw the situation; neither Billy nor Harrington had explained what it was exactly that they needed them to come so quickly for.

Billy knew how Jane got when she was protective, as well as how she reacted when she was angry, so before anything could be explained he decided that it would be prudent to indirectly diffuse the situation.

“Where were *you*?” he asked his bodyguard, eyes flicking over her fancy outfit.

She relaxed, but only marginally – but it was enough that he knew she wouldn’t attack Harrington without his word now; she understood that that’s not what he called her for.

“I was at the theatre,” she sniffed, and then finished pointedly, “On a *date*.”

Billy supposed that explained what Wheeler was doing there. He just hadn’t expected that Jane would get in a relationship with *one* of Harrington’s people, let alone *two*. He looked between Wheeler and Myers, saw their challenging expressions that dared him to speak out against it, and he didn’t know if it was the polyamory or the fact that they were in Harrington’s camp that they thought they would have to defend – maybe both – but whatever. They were all adults, and Billy was certain that Jane could kick *both* their asses, should it be so necessary. (He still made a mental note to investigate them further, though.) He was honestly just glad that there apparently wasn’t going to be a love triangle going on with all of them – that was *way* too much drama, more fitting for some YA novel.

“Hargrove needs proof that we’re *not* involved in the human trafficking ring,” Harrington said bluntly, before they could talk further about the three’s date. “Will, he’ll take your word for it.”

Myers – Will – looked startled that it was *his* integrity being trusted here, but he answered without hesitation. “It’s true. We, um...” he glanced at Jane a little guiltily, then looked back at Billy. “We thought you guys were the ones heading it.”

“That good enough for you?” Harrington asked Billy, looking a little sarcastic, which – *rude*. Billy was the one with the gun pointed at him, and it’s not like Harrington had been *more* trustworthy than Billy had been.

“Yeah, it’s fine, I believe you,” Billy grouched. “Janie, same thing – tell him why we wanted to ally ourselves with him.”

“I would be happy to quell your fears,” Jane said to Harrington, looking at him with a cold expression, “Just as soon as you point the gun away from my boss.”

Harrington actually looked a little sheepish at her comment, and he not only pointed the gun away, but he deposited it on the table and stepped away from it so that it wasn’t in immediate reach, before he looked at her expectantly – hopefully.

Billy expected Jane to give the same sort of statement that Myers had, something simple and vague but enough that it would assuage any suspicions the Italian still had. What he hadn’t expected was for Jane to begin to undo the pearl buttons on the wrist of her left sleeve, and immediately realization swept through him at what she was about to do.

“Jane,” he started to protest, but Jane cut across him, keeping her eyes on Harrington and acting like Billy wasn’t there.

“I wasn’t always Jane,” she told him calmly. “I don’t remember a time before my name was just Eleven.”

Her arm was revealed, and she stepped forward, close enough for Harrington to see the tattoo on the inside of her forearm, near her wrist – *011*. Billy was gratified to see the horror and regret that swept across Harrington’s face – he didn’t think that it was faked, too immediate of a reaction for it to be anything but his first thought. Clearly Harrington had already guessed where Jane was going with this.

“We didn’t have names,” she told Harrington, with a blank expression on her face, eyes far away from the present. “Just numbers. The highest number I remember seeing was 207. It was based on how many people were in each shipment. I don’t know how many Elevens there are. When I got out, I didn’t know who I was. Girls they can’t identify – they’re called Jane Doe. So that’s my name. Kali found her name in a book. She was Eight. We call ourselves sisters, because we grew up together, sort of.”

Jane's eyes refocused, looking at Harrington again, and she glared a little. "We got out when I was twelve – Kali and me. Billy found us, offered us jobs as runners in his family because it was a way to give us protection and security. Since then he's done nothing but try and take down the ring that was responsible for stealing our childhoods. When did *you* find out about it? You didn't return to your family until *four years ago* – what the hell do *you* know about loyalty when the going gets tough?"

"Jane," Billy murmured, heading off the rant borne of protectiveness. He might agree with her, on some level, but they *were* all on the same side here and he didn't want to change that. She and Kali were *very* good at their jobs, because of how protective they were of Billy not just as a mafia boss or as *their* boss, but as *Billy*. The one who had hired them at almost eighteen years old, had put them under the Hargrove family protection because he didn't trust anyone else to do so. It made sense that they were so protective, sure, but it wasn't needed right now, now that he knew that Harrington was after the same goal that he was.

Jane subsided, still glaring a little but backing off, probably realizing the same thing Billy did. Billy looked over at Wheeler and Myers – they didn't look surprised at Jane's revelations; Billy figured she must have told them some of it, at least. That at least assuaged some of his fears; Jane was generally a distrustful person, but if she had decided that these two were deserving of her trust, then they were probably decent guys. (Didn't mean he wasn't going to give them a talking-to though, because Jane was like a sister to him and he didn't want anyone treating her like shit.)

"Well, I won't apologize for suspecting you, because I did what I could with the information I had," Harrington said, despite the somewhat apologetic look on his face. "But I do hope that this means we can become an *actual* alliance, because we have the same goals you do."

Billy nodded at him. "I agree," he said, and offered his hand to the other man. "No hard feelings?"

Harrington shook his hand immediately, smile genuine. "None."

It had certainly not been in Billy's plans for the night, but after the other three left he and Steve (and he *could* call him Steve now, because now he knew he wasn't a terrible dude – or at least not any worse than *he* was) stayed in the room and just talked. They started with updating each other on the information they each had, what they had discovered in their investigations.

They learned quickly that each side had about the same information, barring the papers Steve'd had hidden in the drawer. Steve told him that Alexei had found the papers, had been the one to match identities after figuring out the middle strip of code; Billy added his realization that the numbers on the far left side were the labels each person was given, in the same way Jane had been 011. They were each apparently under the impression that the other had been a middleman at the very least for running the trafficking ring, and they weren't sure how they had come to that conclusion if both of them were telling the truth, which made Billy bring up the mole again, asking if Steve had found anyone.

As he'd half expected, Steve hadn't. Henderson was looking into it more, because he did more background stuff that Steve just wasn't able to do as the family head. Billy didn't voice his skepticism on Henderson's trustworthiness, but Steve seemed to see it in his expression just fine, because he told him that even if Billy didn't trust Henderson, Tommy and Carol were the only other ones aside from Wheeler and Sinclair in the know about Steve trying to bring down the trafficking ring, and they knew enough to be alarmed if anything happened.

They very carefully didn't bring up what they'd been doing just before these revelations, or what the intent had been behind it. Billy guessed that Steve had been taking him to bed to try and prise the secrets out of him, and he scolded himself for feeling a little hurt by it. It was ridiculous; he'd been doing exactly the same thing, which Steve definitely knew by now. Billy had just been better at it than Steve had been – after all, they'd never gone back to *Billy's* place.

But then it seemed that Steve hadn't been thinking the same thing Billy had, about ignoring their...*bedroom activities* like it had never

happened, because then after all that, Steve said, “I guess this is why you were flirting from the beginning. You got your answers easier than just a simple alliance.”

Billy shrugged. He was seated in the plush chair next to the desk, sitting like he was comfortable and they were just two guys chatting, trying to pretend like all of this was casual, was *normal*. He wasn't going to let on that things were weird now that it hadn't gone with at least one of them eating a bullet, as they'd both obviously been expecting.

“Faster, maybe,” he allowed. “Not really easier.”

Steve snorted, using his foot to leverage himself further up on the head of the bed, leaning against the pillows with one knee bent casually, arm resting across the top of it. “You don't need to spare my feelings here,” he said dryly, with a note of self-deprecation under the sarcasm he tried to portray. “I've been called ‘easy’ before – I just didn't expect it to be with the head of another family.”

Billy's brow furrowed. “Are you – *slut-shaming* yourself? Did you forget the fact that we were *both* participants in this?”

Steve waved a hand, only partly successful in covering for his reddened ears. “No, not – not like that. I just mean...I mean, I guess we can just act like normal mafia heads now, without all – *that*. It's not really the usual, sleeping with someone in another family just to keep up an alliance.”

It was – strange, Billy settled on, that Steve was acting so uncertain. Up until now, the man had always seemed self-assured in a way that was more than the confidence just on the edge of arrogance of someone bestowed with power. He'd been nothing but confident in formulating the terms of their alliance, in talking with him about anything to do with what they did together in regards to their territories or more recently about the trafficking, had even been the most assured in bed. Billy would have called it cool detachment and a level head were it not for the fire of passion he saw in his eyes in any situation, public or private.

Now though, Steve seemed like a recently-deflowered virgin,

uncertain after a one-night stand whether this *meant* anything, would lead to any sort of relationship, hoping for it but also trying to be prepared for being tossed out on their ass.

Later, upon reflection, Billy would decide that this had actually been a rather apt description for why Steve was nervous. At the time though, he was just incredulous because they'd fucked around with each other for *three whole months*. Why was Steve nervous just *talking* about sex? Especially for someone who was so familiar with it even before Billy, he was acting like it was something greater than some simple physicality.

And then he wondered – had Steve been in the same situation that Billy had found himself in, of hoping and wishing that the other was a false lead? Wished that they could just be two guys finding physical relief in the other rather than using the other to get closer?

Well, Billy decided then. There was no reason for them to *stop*, in that case.

“Let’s go to my place,” he suggested, rising to his feet. He figured after all this, he ought to extend some measure of trust toward the other man, and they’d always gone to this room before, after that night at the gym. He ought to return the favor, take him to Billy’s place. That is, if Steve was indeed still interested.

Steve startled a little at Billy’s words, sitting up straighter. “What – *now*?”

Billy shrugged, acting like he didn’t care, like it didn’t matter. (Which it didn’t.) “You showed me yours, I’ll show you mine. Besides...” He gave Steve a slow grin, running his tongue along his top lip as he intentionally swept his eyes up and down Steve’s now clothed form. “We never did get that shower together.”

Steve’s eyes went heated, catching up quickly to Billy’s intent. Still, he hesitated for a brief moment before he practically visibly pushed the doubts away and rose to his feet.

“Why make the trip?” he countered, and Billy smiled in amusement, sucking his bottom lip in with his teeth.

“Why, indeed,” he agreed, watching as Steve walked over to him, and then stared down slightly at him with his inch of height.

“You sure about this?” Steve double checked, and Billy didn’t resist the urge to roll his eyes before reaching up and pulling Steve in with hands behind his neck.

“Hell, no,” he smirked, and pressed his lips to Steve’s.

Max disapproved. Apparently fucking information out of Harrington was okay in her book, but *continuing* to fuck him when their alliance was a real one now was too much. Billy thought that was pretty rich, coming from her, because when he’d gone to ask Jane about her relationship with Wheeler and Myers, Jane had told him that Max was also starting to see the Sinclair guy. When Billy had pointed this out to her, Max had subsided in her arguments, but she still frowned any time he and Steve were brought up.

Billy wasn’t sure exactly what her problem was – he knew that it wasn’t because they were guys; he knew that Max had had her own dalliances with various women too. With her going out with Sinclair, he knew it wasn’t that they were in different families. The only thing he could think of was that they were both *heads* of their families, and perhaps Max worried about the implosion if things went south between Billy and Steve. He knew Steve though, and he knew himself, and he was pretty sure that neither of them would go take it out on the people around them.

Besides, there was nothing *to* go south. It was just sex.

Except that within just a week, Billy and Steve met up for ice cream. Seriously. They went to a little cart that frequently stood at the corner to one of Steve’s hotels, and as they ate their cones they walked down the sidewalk. Billy hadn’t even thought anything of it at the time, even when neither of them licked their cones suggestively. They just talked.

And it wasn’t like it was talking about nothing, like a *date* might suggest. They talked (in code and vague terms, mostly, mindful of the

possibility of listening ears) about the discoveries on either side, some of the rumors they'd heard, debating their accuracy and whether to follow through on certain leads over others.

That first time, they only talked shop. After basing their relationship largely on sex, they had a lot to catch up on now that they weren't just searching for evidence of terrible secrets. By unspoken agreement, they updated each other on these things *outside* the bedroom, keeping that time just for shared physical pleasure.

But then by the third time they met up for ice cream, they were hardly talking about their updates – and not just because there were so few of them to begin with, with both sides being in the information gathering part of their missions. Instead, they learned more about each other as people, as they talked about growing up or past friends.

Billy hadn't realized how little he knew about Steve, until he was telling him a story about when he and Tommy – childhood best friends, apparently – had spied on a meeting, with Carol as lookout for them, when they had been nine. Carol had been discovered before she could warn he and Tommy, and the boys had been caught moments after, and Steve was laughing as he'd told him how they'd been thrashed by their dads so badly that they couldn't sit comfortably for a week afterwards. Billy could remember similar experiences growing up in his own family, but he didn't think he would laugh at those incidents – but then again, he hadn't had a partner in crime in most of those, and Billy was pretty sure that Neil had just *enjoyed* punishing Billy for any misdeeds where John Harrington had just been a traditional old bastard with a tendency to harsh strictness.

Steve didn't talk much about the time he'd been in New York – just very vague things that anyone with a search engine could pick up, and Billy couldn't figure out whether he was ashamed at having left his family in those years or if something terrible had happened there or what, but it only made him more curious to find out just what the Steve Harrington with the fluffy hair had gotten up to as a young adult.

He didn't know how to bring it up, if there was anything there that

the other man wouldn't want to talk about, but it turned out that he didn't need to, because it came up on its own.

They had been talking about the relationships in their respective families, because it turned out that Steve loved to gossip and Billy was smitten amused enough that he obliged him with occasionally bringing up anecdotes of what had reached his ears, and asking what Steve was putting up with in his own camp.

"I guess it's not *super* surprising," Steve admitted after Billy brought up Kali and Robin, looking for an update, and Steve had talked about them getting together. "I've seen them talking together a lot, but I'd just supposed that it was because they were the only ones from your camp."

"Robin is very good at making friends," Billy said. "If she'd got her eye caught on someone in your gang, she would have no problem going after them. Kali too, for that matter."

"They're just so *different*," Steve said dramatically. "I didn't expect it when you sent them over, even *after* I clocked both of them as lesbians. I don't think they know that I saw them kissing in the parking garage yesterday."

"Considering you haven't been awakened by Kali standing over you with her knives, you're probably right," Billy agreed teasingly.

"Shit, would she really try and stab me for finding out? She should hide it better, then."

Billy shrugged. "If she thought you had a problem with it, maybe." Also the fact that she wouldn't want to screw anything up with their alliance and trying to stop the trafficking ring, but they both ignored the unspoken words.

"I gotta know though, how much do you like Sinclair?" Billy said with mock seriousness. "Because I've been meaning to have a little *talk* with him, and he may not come back in one piece. If at all."

Steve swatted Billy's arm, fighting a grin. "Don't whack my people, Hargrove," he ordered.

Billy laughed, a little incredulous and a lot smitten. ““*Whack*”? Who even *says* that anymore?”

Steve laughed with him, and then answered his previous, half-joking question. “Lucas is a good guy – he won’t treat Max wrong. Don’t tell anyone I said this – especially Lucas, because it’ll go to his head – but he’s one of my favorites.”

“Yeah, because I’ll be telling *Sinclair* how much his boss loves him,” Billy said dryly. He heard a phone buzzing and reached into his pocket in case it was Max or Jane looking for him again, but the screen was dark so he slipped it back into his pocket.

“It’s really just a question of whether your dislike for him or your spite for me is stronger at the moment,” Steve teased, voice airy, taking an actual *bite* out of his ice cream, like a heathen. But Billy had given Steve shit for how he ate his ice cream in dates meet-ups in the past, so he didn’t say anything about it now.

“Oh, you think I *spite* you?” Billy said, amused. “And what made you come to that conclusion?”

“Why else would you wear *that* when we’re supposed to be in public?” Steve countered, flicking one finger demonstratively up and down Billy’s form, smirk tugging at his lips. Billy looked down at his clothes, a little surprised, because he hadn’t intended to be particularly dressed up with his outfit. He was more casual than he normally was in public; rather than the dark suit, he was wearing a pair of jeans, a burgundy shirt with the top couple of buttons undone, and his favorite leather jacket and matching boots.

He wasn’t going to question Steve’s attraction though, because Billy was always up to get down, especially with someone as attractive as Steve. The Chicago wind made his hair a little crazier, almost like the pictures he’d seen of him years ago with the fluffy hair, and his cheeks were a little flushed with the heat of the summer day.

“Why would you let the public setting stop you?” Billy teased, and that wasn’t what he’d meant to say but whatever, because Steve looked pleased with his response as much as he was...nervous, almost.

"Why, indeed," Steve murmured, stopping them on the sidewalk and pulling him off to the side out of immediate foot traffic, pressing slightly sticky lips to Billy's. Billy was a little startled that Steve had actually gone along with Billy's half-suggestion for PDA, but he didn't argue against it, returning the kiss in kind. Steve's tongue slipped between Billy's lips, cold from the ice cream, and Billy sucked on it, like he was trying to get the last of the mint chocolate chip flavor from Steve's mouth. After much too short a time Steve pulled back, eyes molten and dark, like pools of chocolate. Billy had hardly noticed the hands moving to his waist, but his attention was drawn to it when those fingers tightened around the belt loops.

"My place?" Billy suggested, a little breathless.

Steve nodded, his tongue swiping over his lips while Billy's eyes tracked the movement. "It's closer," he agreed. "Let's go."

Billy came to awareness slowly, rising out of sleep with all the urgency of a lazy cat napping in the sun. He stretched his ankles and calves out a little, flexing and stretching the muscles while keeping his eyes closed with his head buried in the pillow. He was still lying on his stomach, in the same position as he'd been when he'd fallen asleep. He moved a hand out, seeking out the warmth of Steve's body, and then opened his eyes when he felt only rumpled sheets beside him. It was still a little warm; Steve hadn't been gone from the bed long.

It was then that he heard Steve's voice, out on the balcony; that must have been what had awakened him.

"Yes, Jonathan, I'm fine," Steve was saying quietly, clearly trying not to wake Billy. "Yes, I'm – no, I was just busy. Yeah – he's sleeping."

Billy rolled over in the bed, onto his back, dragging the sheets and blanket with him. He looked out to the balcony; it was darkening outside with approaching nightfall, so he'd only been asleep for maybe an hour at most. Steve was standing with his back to Billy, head bent to look at the ground with one hand holding his phone to his ear, and the other on his hip like a mom or something. Billy

almost snorted at the thought. He was wearing the jeans he'd been wearing earlier in the day, and nothing else. Billy's eyes trailed down the red scratches he'd left across Steve's shoulders, feeling a thrill of satisfaction at the sight before he forced himself to think about the phone call Steve was on instead.

He couldn't remember anyone named Jonathan in Steve's history, whether it was in his own searching or in Steve's stories. But Steve seemed familiar enough with the guy at least that he was comfortable talking to him so casually, without the note of dominance or threat that he would have if he were talking with one of his mafia associates.

"No, he's not going to hurt me," Steve said with a sigh. Billy realized with a jolt that Steve was talking about *him* with this mysterious Jonathan. "No, I trust him. I *know* he's a mafia boss, man. Well, so am I! No, it's... Okay. Whatever. Say hi to Nancy."

Steve closed the phone, blowing out a sigh that was lost to the wind. Billy sat up in the bed, crossing his legs just as Steve turned, startling a little at seeing Billy awake. His expression went a little guilty for a second, maybe panicked? – but Billy didn't care who Steve talked to, he was just curious who this guy was.

"Who's Jonathan?" Billy asked Steve inquisitively when he came back inside, closing the door behind him.

"Sorry I woke you," Steve said first, relaxing a little at Billy's shrug and coming closer. "He called earlier and I didn't want him to worry when he called again but I didn't want to bother you either. I knew him in New York – we went to school together."

Billy examined Steve's expression while he spoke. He didn't seem suspicious really, and there would be no *reason* for Steve to be lying about something like this, but for some reason Billy had the impression that Steve wasn't telling the whole truth.

He decided to ignore it though, because he still didn't really know enough about Steve's history in New York to ask him about specifics like that. It wasn't really his business, anyway – he and Steve weren't like that.

Instead, he prodded, “You weren’t roommates,” and ignored Steve’s raised eyebrow. Steve knew who he was – he *had* to know by now that Billy had researched him, the same way Steve had no doubt researched Billy.

“No, we weren’t roommates,” Steve confirmed, huffing a laugh and dropping onto the bed beside Billy, back in the spot he’d vacated before. “We did go to school together, though. But we met because I used to date his wife.”

Billy froze, looking over at Steve, scandalized. “Please tell me it was *before* they were married,” he said flatly.

“Of course it was,” Steve scoffed, lying back into the pillows. “I knew her first – it didn’t work out, but her little sister was friends with his little brother so they ended up meeting. I was still friends with Nancy, so I met Jonathan through her. Funny enough, me and Jonathan are closer than me and Nancy ever were.” At Billy’s look, Steve rolled his eyes a little. “I get it, it’s weird. But we *are* good friends, and even after finding out about my *Chicago family*, Jonathan wasn’t weird about it. I haven’t seen him since coming back to Chicago, but I talk with him a lot and he’s talking about coming out sometime soon for a visit.”

Billy hummed. “He didn’t sound too keen on you being *friendly* with another mafia head.”

Steve rolled his eyes. “He wasn’t too pleased about me coming back to Chicago in the first place,” he said plainly. “Knowing what he does, and without knowing *you*, he’s leery about just about *anyone* I meet here.”

“Aw, you think he wouldn’t be leery if he *did* know me?” Billy grinned, and crossed the bed, moving so that his knees were on either side of Steve’s hips, hands on the bed on either side of Steve’s shoulders, bracketing him in below him. “You think I’m *not* a bad influence?”

“You’re a *terrible* influence,” Steve concurred, smiling while his hands moved to grab and squeeze at Billy’s sides just below his waist, just this side of dirty. Billy moved from his hands down to his forearms so

that he could get closer, moving his hips in a slow grind against the rough denim of Steve's jeans.

"Aw, thanks, pretty boy," Billy cooed, nipping at a spot under Steve's jaw that was already reddened and irritated from their activities earlier that evening. "I think you're pretty terrible, too."

A laugh bubbled out of Steve's throat, which transformed quickly into a moan when Billy's hand shoved inside Steve's pants. Billy grinned against his throat, feeling the hitch in Steve's breath with how close they were pressed together.

"How are you?" Billy asked him, pulling back a little to look at Steve's slightly confused expression at the question. He affected a look of innocence, of sympathetic concern. "You're probably sore after your ride earlier."

Steve's expression went amused, and maybe a little fondly exasperated. "Yes, Billy, your cock is huge," he said dryly. "Would you like me to ride it again?"

Billy ignored the amusement and the half-sarcastic question, half-serious offer, because Steve didn't get it still, why Billy was asking. "You shouldn't strain yourself so soon after injury," he told him. "Maybe I ought to kiss it better before we try anything else."

Steve's eyes lit with realization and understanding then, before melting into something *hot*, his hands clenching tighter around Billy's hips.

"Yes," he nodded firmly. "I'm *very* sore – I don't even know if I could walk right now. You should definitely kiss it better."

Billy grinned, and went to do just that.

Steve had just gotten out of a meeting with Mateo Quezada, the head of the Dominican mafia, when he felt his phone buzz in his pocket with an incoming text message. He was already smiling as he pulled it out, guessing who it was, and sure enough, it was Billy.

You wanna come over after your meeting?

Before he could even type out a response, a new text message came in with just three eggplant emojis and a wink face.

Huffing a laugh and shaking his head a little to himself, he typed out, *I'll be there in an hour*, and sent it off. He still had to check in with Tommy to let him know the meeting with Quezada had gone well; Quezada was one who always wanted to meet one on one, without any people from either of their side there. Said something about how it gave him a greater measure of who he was dealing with, when there were only two equals in the room. Steve could respect that, but he still had to check in so that his people didn't think he'd been killed or something in the interim – especially after his dad's unsolved murder just months beforehand.

He hadn't expected, even months ago at the funeral, that this was where he would be now. He had been so certain that the Hargroves were the ones heading up the trafficking ring, just needed to find the *proof* of it, and now here he was, not really knowing *more* than he had, but knowing *different*. Billy wasn't actually a bad guy – or at least not any worse than Steve himself was – and was actually someone that Steve genuinely enjoyed spending time with. Not just for sex either – though that was definitely hot enough to keep him interested and going back for more – but his quick intelligence and the kindness Steve could see even if Billy himself couldn't see it...it all added up to a man that Steve was very attracted to.

Not that he could really...*tell* anyone that. Tommy knew, which meant Carol knew, and he didn't try to discourage him but Steve was still pretty sure Tommy disagreed with it. He tried not to take it personally. Dustin had probably guessed it by this point, if any of the pointed questions Steve was sometimes on the receiving end of were any clue. To everyone else, Steve kept up a charade that it was just sex, that it was just convenient and that's why he went back so often.

But he really did...*like* Billy, but he wasn't sure how even Billy would feel about that with so many of the comments he made about how nice it was to blow off some steam, so he went along with it and acted like he wasn't maybe falling in love with the other man, because he didn't want to lose what little he had with him.

Sometimes he thought Billy might like him genuinely too, but he dismissed that as wishful thinking.

He had walked barely a block when he felt his phone buzz again in his pocket, this time with a call. Blowing out a breath, supposing it was Billy again because he got impatient sometimes, he pulled it out, but was surprised to see instead that it was Dustin. He pressed to answer, and then held the phone up to his ear.

“Hey, I’m just headed back,” Steve greeted.

“Steve!” Dustin sounded much more panicked than Steve would have expected, and he began to have the feeling that Dustin wasn’t concerned after the meeting with Quezada – something else was wrong.

“What – what’s wrong?” he rapped out, back straightening, eyes automatically darting around for sign of trouble, despite not being in the other man’s presence.

“I found the rat!” Dustin said, sounding a little hysterical and a lot panicked. “I’m sorry, it wasn’t supposed to take so long but I was looking at it as a Polish name and didn’t think anything of it – I was looking more into the Santoro brothers, because they’ve *always* been pretty sketchy, and it was supposed to be *easy* because it’s not like a lot of people have access to...!”

“Dustin!” Steve barked, having a hard time following with the speed at which Dustin spoke. “I’ll be back in less than fifteen minutes – can this wait until I see you?”

“No!” Dustin stressed, voice rising an octave. “Everyone knows Quezada only meets people one on one – so he knows that you’re alone right now, and I’m *pretty* sure he’s the one who offed your dad! You need to get some place public!”

Steve understood suddenly just what Dustin was getting at. He didn’t know yet who exactly was the enemy, but said enemy knew very well how vulnerable he was right then, and it would be very easy to kill him or *worse* in this small window of time. Like the reminder increased his awareness of his surroundings, he suddenly felt like he

was being watched, and tried to shake off the paranoid feeling, resisting the urge to look around again – just in case.

“Dustin,” he rapped out quickly, even as he did the exact opposite of what Dustin had advised, ducking down a quiet side street with less people out and about. “I need you to contact Billy – Hargrove, okay? He’ll help if...”

“*What?*” Dustin squawked, cutting him off. “Steve, are you hearing me? I don’t know what you’re doing, but you need to get back, *now!*”

“Call Hargrove!” Steve insisted, ignoring Dustin’s frantically given pleas, quickening his pace at the sound of footsteps behind him. He didn’t say anything else, didn’t want to risk giving any information away to an enemy, cutting off the sound of Dustin’s voice with a click of the red button that ended the call. He wasn’t even able to put it in his pocket before there was a sharp, stabbing pain in the back of his neck. His hand snapped up, grabbing the feathered dart and yanking it out even as he spun around to face his attacker – but it was too late; he could already feel his balance failing and his vision blurring so that he could only see the vague shape of the man who had followed him.

Steve had been given a lot of drugs in his life, whether voluntarily in college or at the hospital because of an injury. None of that felt exactly like the way the tranquilizer did though as it entered his bloodstream, burning so cold it felt almost hot before it began to numb everything as his brain began to shut down those functions.

He hardly felt his elbows cracking against the ground as he fell back, still instinctively trying to catch his fall even as he was distracted with literally everything else. His vision was spinning and blurring, simultaneously in slow motion as well as too quick to track, eyes wandering up at the sky, then at the buildings, down the street as he tried rolling himself over to get up. He blinked, eyelids heavy, realized his face was pressed against the ground, wondered how he’d managed to roll over without realizing it, watched as dress shoes entered his line of sight.

He blinked again. His eyes stayed closed.

Notes for the Chapter:

Hahaha if you thought that was the end of secrets between Billy and Steve you thought wrong...

6. Chapter 6

Summary for the Chapter:

“What?” he demanded. “Who the hell is Gorgon?”

“Damien Gorgon!” Henderson said, as though that clarified things. “He’s the rat, I just figured it out a little while ago, but he knew Steve was meeting with Quezada so he would be alone, and I’m pretty sure he killed John so he could take over and now he’s going to kill Steve too and I don’t like you but Steve said I needed to call you before he hung up!”

There were still some holes in that story that Billy would want answers to later, but right then he could only ask, “Why me? What the hell am I supposed to do?”

“I don’t *know*!” Henderson snapped. “I’m just doing what Steve told me – he seemed to think you would know what to do if anything happened!”

Notes for the Chapter:

You guys my sister's baby came early and was born yesterday afternoon and not to be biased or anything but he is the cutest baby ever. I love him so much despite not being able to hold him yet because of COVID restrictions at the hospital. I saw him through the window though and he's adorable! I can't wait to hold him soon!

Anyway that's just my little life update. I'd intended to update this fic yesterday but then my nephew was born and plans changed haha. I hope you like this chapter!

Little bit of a warning - this is where "graphic depictions of violence" comes into play. It's not

exactly violence though - just a description of blood and injury. Oh, also swastika and Nazi allusions. But I figured I would leave the tag just to be safe.

It had been barely thirty minutes since Billy had heard back from Steve when he received a call. He almost didn't answer, not recognizing the number and not wanting to be forced to go and deal with some other mafia-related problem that Max or Jane could see to instead. Not when he had a date hookup with Steve in the next few minutes. But then when he ignored it, the number called back immediately after. He blew out a breath through his nose, letting it ring twice more before he pressed to answer.

"Speak," he barked.

"Hargrove!" Dustin Henderson exclaimed on the other end, sounding simultaneously panicked about whatever he was calling about and relieved that Billy had answered.

It immediately sent his pulse ratcheting up, and he straightened where he stood in front of the mirror. "What's wrong? Is Steve okay?"

"No!" Henderson said immediately. "He was in his meeting with the Dominicans, and then on his way back he went down a street *without* cameras, and we didn't see him appear again and he's still not back. I'm pretty sure Gorgon kidnapped him!"

"What?" he demanded. "Who the hell is Gorgon?"

"Damien Gorgon!" Henderson said, as though that clarified things. "He's the rat, I just figured it out a little while ago, but he knew Steve was meeting with Quezada so he would be alone, and I'm pretty sure he killed John so he could take over and now he's going to kill Steve too and I don't like you but Steve said I needed to call you before he hung up!"

There were still some holes in that story that Billy would want answers to later, but right then he could only ask, "Why me? What the hell am I supposed to do?"

"I don't *know*!" Henderson snapped. "I'm just doing what Steve told

me – he seemed to think you would know what to do if anything happened!”

Okay, Billy had to look at this logically, and he forced himself to take a deep breath, blowing it out slowly and very carefully *not* imagining what might be happening to Steve at that very moment. If the last words Steve had conveyed to Henderson had been that Billy could help, then it wasn’t words shared out of meaningless sentimentality, but belief that Billy would know exactly what to do to help. But was it helping their families, keeping a war from breaking out, or was it something that would help Steve personally?

“Did Harrington give any indication exactly what he thought might happen to him?” Billy asked him, mind jumping quickly from one idea to another, disliking each one more than the last.

Henderson went a little less hysterical at Billy’s calmer tone, and he answered with, “Not verbally. But he went down the quieter street willingly, even when I told him to stay around more people. I think he wanted to make sure none of the civilians were caught in the crossfire of whatever happened.”

“But if he was expecting to be shot, changing location wouldn’t change that any,” Billy said, thinking out loud. “A shooter would get him before making their escape – anyone around him wouldn’t necessarily be in more danger.”

“So he probably expected a kidnapping,” Henderson finished the thought, stress audibly rising before he forced himself to calm again. “He got out of the way so that no one would try playing the hero or something and get hurt.”

“Self-sacrificial idiot,” Billy muttered to himself. Then, to Henderson, “Okay, so if he expected kidnapping, he expects me to *some-fucking-how* be able to figure out where he is and get him out like he’s a goddamn damsel in distress. How the fuck would I know how to do that? I don’t even *know* this Gorgon guy.”

“I don’t know – you’re supposed to be the guy with the answers!” Henderson exclaimed. “Figure it out!”

Before Billy could respond, he heard a clattering sort of sound on the other end, and then the voice he recognized as Tommy's was in his ear.

"Did Steve give you *anything* in the time you two have been fucking?" he demanded brusquely. "Some sort of gift, or something that there might be a way to track something of his with?"

"No," Billy said without pause, beginning to pace, running a hand through his hair. "No, he hasn't given me anything."

"Is there anything that he's mentioned, that might have been out of the ordinary?" Tommy pressed. "Some way that only *you* would be able to pick up how to find him in the event he went missing?"

"Jesus," Billy blew out a breath, thinking back and trying to remember every single conversation they'd ever had, ever. They'd talked about a lot of shit, but none of it seemed particularly important at the moment. "No, it was just – basic shit. We weren't sharing secrets under the covers, if that's what you're getting at."

"Maybe that's it," Carol's voice came next. "Something he wanted to keep secret, but you found?"

"The only thing I *found* was those papers, and you already know about those..." Billy started frustratedly, but then trailed off, stopped his pacing as he remembered something else.

"What – what did you just think of?" Henderson demanded.

"He has a stand, in his room," Billy rapped out. "Are you there – can you get to it?"

"Yes – what am I looking for?" Tommy said, and Billy heard sounds like he'd picked up the phone, was walking to Steve's room.

"The top drawer has a false bottom," Billy directed. "There's a sliding button thing underneath to unlock it. There's a saint's medallion inside – that might be something."

"I sure hope you're right, Hargrove," Billy heard Tommy say over the sound of a door being unlocked.

Me too, Billy thought, gnawing on his bottom lip as he waited for Tommy's word. It was quiet on the other end for a minute, only Tommy's breathing audible with him so close to the phone's speaker. He heard the click of the false bottom opening in the drawer, the movement as things were taken out and put aside, and then Tommy's breathing went quiet for long enough that Billy's stress increased exponentially.

"Well?" he demanded impatiently. "Did you find it? Does it mean anything?"

"Yeah..." Tommy said, drawing out the word a little before he seemed to come back to himself. "Yeah – silver pendant, cheap chain, that's what you're looking for?"

"Presumably," Billy agreed. "Does it look like there's anything attached?"

Tommy hummed in thought as he examined the necklace, the quiet rattle of the chain just barely making it through the phone's speakers. "I think so. I'd have to check – Carol! Get Tina over here – there might be a receiver in this!"

Billy could imagine that the transmitter was probably in Steve's ring, the one he never took off in all their activities, even in the shower. He hoped he was right, and that he'd found the receiver that would tell him where Steve was, so that they could go get him and make sure he was safe.

He didn't want to imagine what he would do if anything happened to Steve.

Waking up was painful. Steve kept his eyes closed for as long as he could, fighting against the headache behind his eyes, the protest to the tranquilizer that had taken him out. He took stock of himself like that, took note of the fact that he was still completely clothed, shoes still on – but he was tied spread eagle against something at his back, with an impressive amount of ropes. That didn't bode well for him – it suggested that he was going to be killed before he was released

from wherever he was. It was not his kidnapper's intention to move him anywhere except when he was already dead.

He clenched his hands into fists, testing the give in the ropes around his wrists and not surprised to find that there was none, but still disappointed by that fact. His signet ring was still securely around the middle finger of his right hand; he was a little surprised that it hadn't been removed while he'd been unconscious.

He strained his ears, trying to figure out where he might be through sound alone, but everything was completely, eerily silent. It suggested that he was either in the middle of nowhere, or in a completely soundproofed room.

He finally opened his eyes, and almost jumped at the sight of the man on the other side of the small-ish room – he hadn't even heard him breathing, had thought he was alone. He looked around the rest of the room quickly, saw that it was richly furnished – like the private room of a club would be, red velvet and gold accents, black tile with white speckled throughout, no windows. He looked back at his captor, who sat in a chair in front of a red velvet curtain that Steve was pretty sure hid the door.

"Damien," he breathed in some confusion. "You – what are you doing here?"

The older man raised a condescending eyebrow, continuing to stare at him. "You haven't figured it out yet?" he said, sounding much too calm for a man holding a knife in his lap in casual, unspoken threat – or promise. "You're a pest; you're *in my way*."

Steve shook his head a little, trying to get his brain to catch up. He realized that he was lashed to a St. Andrew's Cross, but it wasn't a professional one by any means – had no cuffs built into it, instead relying on separate ropes to keep him tied down to it. He'd never been on this side of one before, but he knew that they didn't normally feel this awful.

"You've been a part of my family for years," Steve said, like he was trying to remind him. "Why would – why would you do this *now*?"

“Because I *have* been in your family for years,” Damien countered, rising off of the chair and beginning a slow pace in front of Steve. Steve watched him carefully, not taking his eyes off of him as he moved, wanting to be ready for any sudden movement, even if he couldn’t actually do anything at this point to stop it. “I’ve been loyal, and I did *everything* John expected of me, and then some. And you were the little *brat* that got scared and ran halfway across the country to escape him, *completely* ungrateful for everything he did for you and everything offered to you on a silver fucking platter. I was demoted, I was *humiliated* because I hadn’t been able to keep you from running. Everything I’d worked for for *years*, gone. I was never going to be head of the Italians anymore.”

Steve was confused. “You were never going to be head regardless,” he retorted, unmindful to the threat Damien posed.

“I *should’ve* been!” Damien exploded, whirling on him, and Steve resisted the instinctive urge to press back into the Cross to get away from him; it wouldn’t do any good, anyway. “I was more loyal, and dedicated, and hardworking than you or that Henderson brat *ever* were! I should’ve had my rightful place as boss!”

Steve felt his blood beginning to boil at the unspoken intent in Gorgon’s last words. “I swear to *God*, Gorgon, if you go after Dustin I will fucking...”

“You’ll what?” Gorgon cut him off with a smug smile, anger suddenly disappearing in the face of Steve’s own, gesturing at him with the end of his knife. “You won’t know, anyway – you’ll be *long* dead. And I’ll be the head of the Italians, with all the money and influence that affords me.”

“You’re a fucking lunatic if you think any of my people are going to accept that,” Steve gritted out.

“I can kill *them* just as easily,” Gorgon said with a wave of his hand. “Replace them with *my* people – after all, you brought in *your* people when you came back four and a half years ago. It wouldn’t be so surprising, really.”

“What the hell people could you *possibly* have?” Steve demanded.

“You’ve been with the Harringtons for three decades.”

Gorgon raised an eyebrow. “I knew you were an idiot, but I really hadn’t expected that you were this *stupid*,” he marveled. “I’ve been with the Russians for *years* now. Well, really I was *born* Russian, but things happen, you know.”

“But...your last name is Polish,” Steve said in confusion. “You said you were Polish.”

Gorgon rolled his eyes. “I would tell you to open a history book sometime, but even if you were to live through this, I’m sure it would just be past your understanding. But your death should kill two birds, one stone and all that. Brenner will be pleased to know that one of the thorns in his side is being removed.”

Steve didn’t know who this “Brenner” was, thought the name sounded vaguely familiar, but as Gorgon drew closer, seeming content to stop talking and get to stabbing, Steve knew he had to keep him monologuing if he expected to have the slightest chance of making it out of this alive.

“Why am I tied to this?” he blurted. He tugged his wrists a little against the ropes, smirked a little, affecting like he was still confident and calm, despite the rapid beating of his heart. “I mean, it’s not really the standard restraint for kidnapping.”

Gorgon stopped his advance, not seeming to notice that Steve was stalling and perfectly content to keep sharing his grievances and his evil plan. “This is another, third bird,” he said, tilting his head. “I figure you’re such a *bitch* in every other aspect of your life, it wouldn’t be surprising that you would go bitch for Hargrove either. Everyone will think he betrayed you while you were vulnerable, and while they’re going after the Germans I can take charge that much more easily in the power vacuum.”

“No one’s going to believe that,” Steve scoffed, shifting in his bonds. “And what are you going to do when Hargrove at least knows he’s not the one who killed me?”

Gorgon shrugged. “It won’t matter. Enough people will believe it that

he's the one at fault that they'll go after him. And just to be *sure* the Germans get blamed and not some other little trollop...well, that's what the knife is for." He gave Steve a pleased smile, gesturing again with said knife.

"So you have some *other* way to kill me?" Steve said, because he'd thought he would get...he didn't know, stabbed or something, left to bleed out.

"Oh, no, I'm *counting* on this killing you," Gorgon said with a condescending nod. "After all, how does a mob – or mafia, in this case – leave a warning for another family?" He moved forward suddenly, and Steve couldn't hold back the strong flinch, expecting a knife to slide into him, but Gorgon just grabbed the top of his shirt, ripping it down and open so fast and so hard that the buttons went flying. Then he slowed, trailing the cold metal of the knife point over his chest, and Steve suddenly understood – not only the answer to Gorgon's question, but also that the man was waiting for Steve to respond.

"They leave a symbol," he breathed. He saw Gorgon's eyes trailing over the rapid up-down of his bared stomach as he breathed too quickly to get much air in his panic, and he forced himself to calm down – at least enough that he wasn't so visibly scared, not wanting to show weakness to the madman. He tried to think of Billy, of Dustin, of how they were probably looking for him and he just needed to stall a *little* longer...

"That's right," Gorgon hissed, dark excitement visible in his eyes. He kept trailing the knife over Steve's chest in a particular pattern, and Steve tried to figure out what it was just as a way to keep his mind focused as Gorgon went on in his gloating plans. "I'm going to make it *very* clear who was responsible for your *gruesome* murder, and the other families will flock in the opposite direction to the Germans – in *our* direction."

Steve had expected the symbol Gorgon planned to carve into him to be something like the iron cross, a traditional symbol in Germany and one that would do the job, or if Gorgon was feeling particularly artistic, the Bundesadler – the eagle with its head turned to one side that had been in German history for centuries. But he was horrified

and then *pissed* when he realized on Gorgon's second and then third pass just what Gorgon was tracing almost absentmindedly over his skin – a *swastika*.

“Just because they're German doesn't mean they're *Nazis*, you goddamned *fuck*,” he snarled, clenching his hands into fists so tight that his nails bit into the palms of his hands.

Gorgon shrugged, outwardly unbothered by Steve's fury, but eyes bright like was drinking it in greedily. “Logic means nothing in the face of anger,” he said, stopping the tracing with the knife but keeping it pressed to his skin as he gazed at him, already triumphant. “And who *else* would they blame, with all of this added together?”

“You're *going* to get caught,” Steve promised, shaking slightly with fury. “And I hope they put you in the fucking chair and you feel every watt going through your *pathetic* body, you *fucking*...”

“You bore me,” Gorgon declared, cutting him off, and before Steve could say anything else, without further ado the man pulled back his hand, and then stuck the knife in his grip sharply into his breast.

“*Fuck!*” Steve half groaned, half cried at the immediate, unexpected pain, and then sucked his lips sharply between his teeth to keep back other sounds as he felt warm blood immediately dribble out from the wound, spilling in rivulets down his chest and pooling in the waistband of his pants, soaking them through with his own blood.

“Aw, don't go quiet on me now,” Gorgon teased mockingly, dragging the knife with agonizing slowness through the flesh, more and more blood spilling out. “I so *love* to hear your sounds. Is that what Hargrove would say to you? Does he like the sounds you make when you *beg*? Let me hear them, Steve. Show me what you sound like when he fucks you.”

Steve stared up at the ceiling, lips tight, telling himself that he'd had worse pain than this, that he could deal with it as long as he needed to. He didn't think Gorgon was making the cuts deep enough to kill yet – he was just playing with him.

He sucked a breath in through his nose, gritted out, “Fuck – you,”

through the increasing pain.

Gorgon clicked his tongue in mock sympathy. “Wrong answer,” he cooed, shifting the knife to make the next horizontal cut. Steve sucked in a breath, preparing for more pain –

And then the door flew open, music immediately blasting into the previously soundproof room from the club space outside, and Gorgon jerked in startlement, a moment before his body jerked four more times in quick succession with the force of the bullets ripping into his chest. He stood for a moment, stunned, before he collapsed in a lifeless heap to the ground.

Steve dropped his head from looking at the ceiling to look at the newcomers, seeing through eyes he hadn’t realized were blurred slightly with tears four of the people he trusted most in the world. Billy was at the front of them, still holding his gun with the silencer on the end, staring furiously at Gorgon on the ground, Tommy, Carol, and Dustin right behind him with their own guns out.

“Fuck,” Steve breathed, voice filled with relief, and Billy’s gaze snapped to him, immediately softening as he hurried forward.

“You found the necklace,” Steve said a little dumbly while Billy reached up to untie one wrist.

“Yeah,” Billy agreed, fingers moving quickly to free him, “Saint Anthony, Patron Saint of Lost Persons – very clever.”

Steve huffed a little laugh. “Thought you might appreciate that,” he said, reaching over with his now freed hand to untie the other one, while Billy moved to his ankles. He winced as his movement pressed against the still bleeding wound, sending a stab of pain through him again, but he pressed through it anyway because he just really wanted down from the damn Cross.

“Do I need to call Myers?” Carol questioned, eyes critically examining Steve’s wounded form.

“Nah,” Steve dismissed, rubbing his hands over his arms to get the pins and needles feeling out of them faster while Billy worked on the

last knot. “The tranq will have left my system by tomorrow, and I can do the stitches myself.”

“Yeah, I’ll call Myers,” Carol said flatly, rolling her eyes and leaving the room. Steve huffed, a little irritated at the open defiance but mostly just amused and glad to have a friend as his employee.

At last the knot was undone and Steve was freed, and Billy immediately rose to his feet, unmistakably fussy as he batted Steve’s hands away from his own arms, determined to be the one to rub feeling back into them himself. Steve didn’t tell him that his arms were mostly fine now, because the care was nice and he didn’t really want Billy to stop touching him.

“He didn’t hurt you anywhere else?” Billy double checked, eyes tracking over him like his clothes would be hiding another wound.

“No,” Steve reassured him. “Just the cut – he mostly just gloated at me about his plans.”

“What the hell was he cutting you for?” Billy asked, seeming almost afraid of the answer as he inspected the odd placement of said cut. It was on the right side, away from the heart, and was no more than skin deep; it clearly wasn’t a cut meant to kill – at least not immediately.

“Supposed to be a symbol,” Steve said bitterly, honest only because he knew he would end up telling Billy eventually anyway – that, or he would figure it out. “A swastika, so people would immediately look at the Germans as the ones at fault.”

“I guess that explains why he took you to a place like this,” Tommy muttered, glancing around the room.

Billy’s eyes were furious, looking like he regretted not dragging out Gorgon’s death longer, and Steve wasn’t sure whether it was because the man was going to leave the mark on Steve, or whether it was because of what the swastika represented. In any case, Steve quickly moved on, not wanting to dwell on the matter.

“I’m glad you were able to figure out how to find me without much

to go on,” Steve told him. “Sorry I never told you about the medallion before.”

“It certainly wasn’t *easy*,” Dustin sighed long-sufferingly from his spot beside Tommy at the door. “And how is it that *we* never knew about this special necklace?”

Steve was about to look up at his brother in all but blood, retort already on his lips, but it was at that moment that Billy abandoned rubbing Steve’s arms to wrap one large hand around the back of Steve’s neck, pulling him close to touch their foreheads together.

“Don’t fucking scare me like that again, princess,” he breathed, sounding relieved and desperate in equal measure. Steve was too startled at the caring movement – done in *public* no less – to complain about the newly bestowed nickname (because he was *not* a damsel in distress). “I love you too fucking much to be able to live through that again.”

Steve stopped completely, freezing as he couldn’t believe his ears. He stared with wide eyes at Billy’s face less than an inch from his own, at the face of the man whom he hadn’t thought cared for him back in the same way that Steve had grown to care for him, but who had just professed his love for him without prompting. It seemed too good to be true; for a wild, insane moment, Steve worried that he had passed out from blood loss during Gorgon’s knife play and he’d hallucinated everything in the past few minutes.

But the body under his hands was warm and *real*, and he unfroze just as Billy sighed a little and pulled back.

“You don’t have to say anything,” he said like the words were being dragged out of him. “I know we’re just...”

“I love you too,” Steve blurted, not wanting to hear the rest of Billy’s sentence, certain that whatever Billy was going to finish with would hurt. “I do, I...I wasn’t going to say anything if you didn’t – I didn’t want to make things weird. But I – I love you too.”

Billy didn’t grin, didn’t beam at him joyfully or laugh and spin him around like they did in the movies. But the quiet contentment and joy

in his eyes was better, and it was just for Steve to see and that made it even *more* special. Steve couldn't resist leaning over, closing the distance between them once again as he pressed his lips to Billy's, arms wrapping around Billy's waist to keep him close – not that Billy was trying to get away.

“Okay,” Dustin drawled from his place at the door as Steve and Billy pulled their lips away from each other, “This is great and all, good for you guys, seriously, but Steve, you really need to get stitched up *pronto*. Carol called the cleaners so they'll be here in a bit to deal with Gorgon. Let's get out of here.”

Billy knew he was hovering, but he couldn't help it, and he didn't really want to stop in the first place. He'd been half certain that they would be finding a dead body in that club that Steve's ring had led them to, and on first glance at Steve tied up on that Cross, Gorgon carving the knife into his flesh, he'd thought for a moment that they were too late.

Although he hated Gorgon for his smugness, his playing with Steve to mess with his head, he was also somewhat grateful for it, because if Gorgon had been more focused on the actual killing part of his plan, they *would* have been too late. The five-inch long cut on his right breast proved that enough.

And so he hovered, because he had to keep touching Steve to assure himself that Steve was still there, warm and alive and real. Thankfully Steve didn't seem to mind, and was even the one to occasionally reach out to squeeze Billy's hand before turning back to Tommy and Henderson as they swapped information. They were headed to one of Steve's hotels – not the one he lived in, but one that Steve met with his associates in more often. Myers was apparently already waiting for them to get back so that he could stitch up Steve's cut, which may or may not be as bad as they had first thought.

While they drove to the hotel, they swapped information – Henderson filled in the gaps of Steve's knowledge, whatever Gorgon hadn't seen the need to share or that he hadn't elaborated on, and Steve talked more about what had happened to him before they

showed up, looking for clues as to whether there might be more rats in the family, or what the Russians might know now.

The discussion paused when they got to the hotel, entering through the back door so that no one could see the bloodied and disheveled owner flanked by his people. They were met by Myers, who grabbed Steve's forearm immediately, looking as relieved that Steve was okay as the rest of them as his eyes tracked over Steve's whole body, taking him in. Billy supposed he shouldn't be as surprised by that as he was; although Myers didn't have as visible of a job as Tommy or Carol or Henderson – the ones more immediately close to Steve – he was still trusted enough that he knew what was going on, of the few in Steve's crew that knew. And that trust meant that Myers was clearly close enough to be considered a real friend to Steve.

"Come on, I cleared the room," Myers told him in his usual quiet voice, releasing Steve's arm with a seeming great reluctance. He turned and walked with quick steps down the hall, and they all walked past a couple of guards at the door that Billy didn't know the names of but recognized from Steve's security.

"Sit," Myers told Steve, pointing at the chair next to the desk. Steve smiled a little to himself, clearly not offended at being ordered around by his doctor – or maybe just used to it – and obeyed, finally shrugging off his jacket and shirt to make room for Myers to work. Billy's lips thinned as he saw the blood more clearly now against Steve's pale skin, some dried and some still sluggishly bleeding from the vertical wound in his chest.

But he didn't say anything, just watching intently while Tommy stood guard next to the door, and Henderson sat on the bed with his legs crossed under him while he watched Myers put on a pair of gloves and begin cleaning up the wound.

"Clearly, there's something about the alliance with Hargrove that scared Gorgon," Henderson said, picking up the conversation they'd had before it had been cut off with their arrival. "Or at least the people Gorgon was working for. Any ideas?"

Steve shook his head, and then the way his stomach suddenly jumped a little with startled breath betrayed his pain at alcohol being pressed

to his wound, but he didn't comment on it. "I don't know that it was anything to do with the Russians," he theorized. "Or, not directly, at least. Maybe someone within the crew?" He frowned thoughtfully, visibly turning ideas over in his head.

"Are we sure he wasn't just resentful that you came back and took what he saw as his 'rightful place' as head of this family?" Tommy volunteered, something odd in his expression as he watched Steve. Billy didn't know how to read it, but it didn't seem malicious so he decided not to worry about it.

"I mean, that *could* be it," Steve hedged, glancing over at his bodyguard. "But something...I don't know, when I mentioned his last name he talked about how I should know the history between Poles and Russians more, but he didn't really get into it."

"That could still be about the Harrington family, though," Billy was the one to say.

"He mentioned how getting rid of me would solve several problems, though," Steve remembered. "And something...he mentioned someone who sounded familiar. Said that getting rid of me would please someone called Brenner?"

Billy straightened at that. "Brenner?" he echoed.

"You know him?" Steve asked, looking up at him.

"He's been an enforcer for the Russians for years," Billy remembered. "Popped up out of nowhere; no one really knows where he came from but Antonovich seems to trust him."

"He's not really important even in the Russian mafia," Tommy piped in.

"If he's not important, why would Gorgon be so eager to be making *him* happy?" Steve said, and then shook his head. "I think this Brenner guy is more important than anyone lets on. Tommy, will you ask Carol to have Tina look more deeply into him after she's done overseeing the cleanup?"

Tommy nodded, pulling out his phone without a word and shooting

off a quick text. Billy didn't look at him though, more intent on watching Myers carefully gluing Steve's wound together with liquid stitches.

"It will scar, but it won't be too bad," Myers told Steve quietly in the pause.

"Thanks, Will," Steve sighed out, looking up at the ceiling before looking over at Billy, standing off to the side so he could see everything but still stay out of the way.

"Least it's only one line," Steve said with a wry grin that was a little crooked at the edge. "Chicks dig scars, right?"

Billy sighed and rolled his eyes, not amused by Steve's attempt at humor when he knew what Gorgon had *intended* to carve into that beautiful torso. "'Chicks' better not be looking at it," he said, playing along despite his lingering tension.

"Aw, you don't think I'm pretty anymore?" Steve teased with a little pout, ignoring Henderson's exaggerated, complaining sighing at the bed.

"Of course you're pretty," Billy said hotly, huffing a little. "But I'd prefer your insides to *stay* on the inside."

"I'll do my best in the future," Steve promised. "That reminds me – do you still have the necklace?"

"Think Tommy's got it," Billy answered, looking over at the redhead with an eyebrow raised in expectation.

Tommy dug into the inner pocket of his jacket, fishing out the apparently not-so-cheap saint medallion. "Yeah, I got to the hotel sooner than Hargrove, so I've been carting it around."

Steve blinked as he accepted the medallion in the palm of his hand, a slightly befuddled expression on his face. He looked at Billy again.

"I thought you were the one to find it," he said, and Billy thought there was something almost searching in his voice and his expression, but he wasn't sure why.

"I figured out what you were after, but I was at my place when Henderson called," Billy responded, raising an eyebrow a little because he didn't know why this was apparently important. "I told Tommy what to look for."

"Yeah, why didn't we ever know about this secret drawer, but Hargrove *did*?" Henderson demanded, sounding aggrieved. "We could've found you a lot sooner if we knew things like this, Steve."

"I found the drawer by accident," Billy drawled, amused by Henderson's offense at not being the favorite. Steve snorted, and Billy amended, "Well, I went looking for it. Not the point. It's not like Steve is sharing secrets with me in bed about what to do in case he's kidnapped."

"I'll have to remember to do that in the future," Steve said, and when Billy looked back at him, he found Steve staring at Tommy, who was staring back at him with a blank expression, like he was working to hide anger underneath the surface until they were alone.

Whatever. Not his business – he didn't care what the bodyguard thought about Billy knowing more about how to keep Steve safe than he did. The two of them could hash it out on their own.

Steve looked at Billy, and if Billy didn't know any better he would think that Steve seemed almost...nervous. Regretful, maybe.

But a second later the look disappeared, replaced with a genuine smile, and he held his hand out to Billy like an offering, the saint medallion coiled in the palm of his hand.

"Here," he told him. "You can keep it with you. I trust you to keep me safe."

Billy blinked, his throat suddenly tight, because he knew the gravity of an offer like this. It wasn't just a way of keeping Steve safe if god forbid he were kidnapped again, a way for Billy to be able to find him again. He could ostensibly use the tracking mechanism at any time, like some sort of high-tech Find My iPhone. He could easily abuse its use, use it to watch everywhere Steve went whenever he wanted. Being able to track Steve at any time...for someone in

another mafia family, this was a big deal. It was a huge show of trust, and Billy almost wasn't sure what to do about it.

But he had meant what he'd said earlier that night – he loved Steve, and he didn't ever want to let him go. So he returned and acknowledged the trust Steve was giving him, and he accepted the necklace, securing it immediately around his neck.

“How does it look?” Billy asked Steve, smirking like it would do anything to hide how touched and pleased he was.

Steve bit his lip a little, not looking at the necklace but at Billy. “It looks perfect,” he said, his voice hushed.

And Billy really couldn't be expected to resist then, and he bent down to meet Steve in the chair, hand coming around to clasp the nape of Steve's neck, pressing his lips to Steve's.

It was an awkward angle, Steve sitting and Billy standing, and their noses squished together to make it more difficult to breathe, but Billy didn't care because Steve was as responsive as ever, and it was lucky Myers had moved out of the way because it meant Billy was uninhibited in his movements.

Henderson made exaggerated puking noises, and as one, Billy and Steve raised their hands to flip him off, still kissing.

Billy should have expected his luck to fail eventually. He'd never been able to keep good things for long, and Steve had been the best thing that had ever happened to him. He should've expected then that the fall was going to be a lot harder.

7. Chapter 7

Notes for the Chapter:

Happy Ides of March! Is that something people say?
Idk. Sucked for Caesar.

Billy should have expected his luck to fail eventually. He'd never been able to keep good things for long, and Steve had been the best thing that had ever happened to him. He should've expected then that the fall was going to be a lot harder.

It went like this.

Two days after Steve had been kidnapped by Gorgon, and his security had thus been tightened around him as a result, Steve had shown up at Billy's place just minutes after texting him that he was on his way. Billy had half expected that they were going to fuck again, because they hadn't since the kidnapping because Steve was so busy weeding out others in his crew and whatever else he thought needed doing after having been so severely compromised. He'd hardly seen Steve in that time, mostly just texting with the exception of one phone call the night before when they'd been going to bed.

But it had been alright, because he knew that Steve was busy, and it wasn't like Billy was lacking in things to do either as he looked further into Gorgon and any of his associates, whether it was in the past or after he'd joined the Russians.

When Steve had come through Billy's door though, he looked excited in a way that wasn't sexual or expectant in any way, but more like something victorious.

"We figured out who's running the trafficking ring," he declared as soon as the door was closed behind him, not wanting anyone else to hear their conversation.

Billy immediately forgot about his half-formed expectations, eyes lighting up in shared excitement.

“What?” he demanded. “Who? *How?*”

“Something about Brenner kept bothering me,” Steve told him, sitting across from Billy on the bed, one leg under him and the other dangling off to the side. “I knew I’d heard his name before, but I was *pretty* sure it wasn’t in relation to studying up on other mafias. But it didn’t make sense, because *obviously* he’s associated with the Russians, and it’s not like I’ve been back in Chicago for *that* long, all told.”

“So – what?” Billy prodded. “Did you hear his name in New York, or something?”

“Sort of – close,” Steve confirmed with a nod. “Have you ever heard of Carroll Pharmaceuticals?”

“No.”

“That’s not too surprising – they’re a bigger company out on the East Coast,” Steve explained. “Their farthest West location is in Indianapolis. I checked into their business a couple times in New York – old habits, and all that – and I *did* discover tax evasion going on, but it’s whatever because that’s not my business and I didn’t really care.

“*But*. Carroll Pharmaceuticals is a subsidiary of IchorUltra, whose corporate office runs out of Chicago.”

“IchorUltra – isn’t that a blood bank?” Billy checked.

“Mm-hm,” Steve nodded quickly, eyes bright. “And you wanna guess who the COO of the company is?”

Billy stared at him. “Brenner?”

Steve nodded excitedly. “Martin Brenner! So I thought to myself – why would Gorgon have been so eager to please the COO of a blood bank? So I looked into IchorUltra more, and it turns out they have different connected companies all over the world. It would suggest that they have a *lot* of employees, right? But after looking at their employee records, even accounting for people paid under the table, it doesn’t match up. To keep these different locations and warehouses

up and running to the capacity that their finances would suggest, they would need to have two, maybe even three times more employees than they are admitting to.”

“Okay,” Billy said slowly, “But that still doesn’t explain how it connects to the trafficking.”

“But it *does*,” Steve insisted, pulling a folded paper out of his back pocket. “Because when you look at each of the locations to these businesses and warehouses, they’re all within an hour of an international airport.” He thrust the paper at Billy, and Billy took it, seeing a familiar-looking paper – it was the list of code only half-deciphered, the one that told of the victims in flat black and white numbers and letters as though it was the sum of them.

Steve tapped on the column to the far right of the paper. “I figured out what these codes mean. OVB – that’s Novosibirsk. SUF – Samara. This is where all those people are being taken to!”

“Okay, what’s the numbers next to them?” Billy asked, tapping the three or four digits beside the airport codes. “Are those the flight numbers?”

Steve shook his head. “I don’t know yet,” he admitted. “Still trying to figure that one out, because things are a little screwy with the flight companies. But the very fact that it’s all connected means that Brenner is overseeing this whole ring, if not heading it up completely.”

Billy grinned, but it wasn’t a joyful grin; it was more – satisfied. Dark. “Well, as soon as we figure that out, we can go take ‘em down.”

Steve beamed back at him. Moments later, they were finally actually fucking like Billy had thought they were going to do from the beginning. It was rough and quick and everything Billy wanted, both fueled by the victory of coming closer to their goal.

The next night, Billy showed up at Steve’s door with takeout in his hands, intent on surprising the other man. When Steve opened the door, he was apparently *very* surprised to see him there.

“Did I forget about plans?” Steve asked him, looking distracted and tired as he glanced at the watch on his wrist. Billy’s lips quirked with amusement at the sight of him; he was in a tee shirt and pajama pants, and it really shouldn’t have been as adorable as it was.

“Nah, I just figured I’d drop by,” Billy announced, walking inside. “I got you spring rolls.”

He stopped then, as he got a good look at the room, and it didn’t look anything like how it normally did. There were two boards on wheels standing upright against the far wall, notes scribbled and pinned in place. There were arrows pointing from one piece of information to the other, several images of children’s faces scattered throughout. On the bed were the stack of papers Billy had discovered when he’d first found Steve’s secret drawer, but they were scattered and paired and organized in a pattern he couldn’t quite decipher.

Billy looked over at Steve, blinking a little in surprise. “How long did *that* take you to put together?” he asked him, nodding his head toward the boards.

“Oh, I’ve sort of accumulated it over several months,” Steve said, sounding distracted. “I usually have it in my closet, lemme just put these away...”

Billy set the bags of takeout on the mostly empty desk, staring at the boards and tilting his head as Steve gathered things up to put away. It looked like a high-tech conspiracy chart, though certainly much better organized, and lacking in theories so much as overflowing in facts.

Then he noticed words attached to several pictures on the board – all the same word: *Friday*.

“Wait, what does Friday mean?” Billy asked in confusion before Steve could wheel the board back out of view. He didn’t remember the word “Friday” appearing in any of their discussions – was it some sort of code?

Steve jumped a little, like he was startled. “Oh,” he said, and glanced away. “Just a theory, it’s not really anything...”

Billy's brow furrowed, because Steve was *definitely* lying, but he couldn't think what might be the first cause for it. Also, he knew that Steve had lied to him before by a gut feeling when he did so – not because Steve was so bad at it that he was giving away obvious tells. He didn't know if that meant that the lie was worse or not as bad as they had been before, but bad lying was *definitely* out of character for the other man. He migrated over to the bed, to the scattered papers, looking down at those codes again.

This time though, there were words that Steve had scribbled in the margins of them, arrows pointing to one thing or another, and Billy realized that the boards had just continued to take up space on the bed after Steve couldn't pin any more to the boards. On the papers though, more than the word "Friday" was written *Jun 29*. An arrow was pointed to codes that read *SVX629*.

"You figured out the code!" Billy realized, snatching up one of the papers to scan it further. There were over a dozen that were marked with the *SVX629*, scattered throughout the papers. There were several names that he didn't recognize, written at the top of several of the papers; he didn't know if it was the names of the victims or of the traffickers involved, but at the moment it didn't matter. "This – this is when they leave, isn't it? When they head for these other airports."

"Yeah," Steve said, but his voice sounded off, not quite reaching the level of happiness or victory that Billy would have expected, or that Billy himself felt. He looked up at Steve in a bit of confusion, seeing him doing a very poor job at attempting to look pleased.

"You...why didn't you tell me?" Billy asked him slowly, carefully examining the other man. "Were you trying to keep this from me?"

An expression of guilt swept over Steve's features before he was able to hide it, and something in Billy's heart sank, sat like a stone in his stomach, because he knew immediately that he was right. For some reason, Steve hadn't planned to tell him about how he'd figured out the code.

"Why?" Billy demanded, thankful that his voice came out angry rather than hurt. "Do you not trust me?"

“No, I do!” Steve said immediately, taking a step closer. Billy took a step back, keeping the physical distance between them and ignoring the wounded expression that swept over the other’s face. “Billy, I was going to tell you, I *promise*...”

“Steve, the twenty-ninth is three days away – when the hell were you going to tell me?” Billy interrupted, throwing the paper angrily back down to the bed. “We don’t know how long this information is good for, and we need to have the time to mobilize our crews so that we can take these guys down!”

“No!” Steve blurted, eyes wide and – panicked, Billy decided on the adjective. “I mean, this is just a theory, and we don’t have all the details about where they’re being held, so what if we stormed the wrong place?”

“There are two locations for IchorUltra in the whole city,” Billy said, struggling to keep his temper and feelings at bay. “It would *not* be hard to go to both.”

“But we don’t *know*!” Steve insisted. “What if there are others that we alert if we went storming in, and they went underground and got worse when we *thought* they were gone?”

“You don’t really think that,” Billy said immediately. “I know you, Steve, and you did a lot of research before you came to me even just *yesterday*. You know *exactly* where those kids are being held, but for *some fucking reason*, you don’t *want* to go save them.”

“Billy, I *do*,” Steve pleaded, taking another step forward, but Billy took another step back, shaking his head.

“Stop lying to me,” he said coldly. “You know something, or you’re planning something. At least I *hope* that’s the case, and you’re not just afraid that I’ll find out you’re in the middle of this ring, after all, because that’s what it looks like from here.” Steve looked stricken by his words, hand outstretched but not coming any closer this time.

Billy shook his head, lips pressed together tightly to try to keep back his temper. “Give me *one* reason why I shouldn’t storm the place. One *good* reason why I should trust *anything* you have to say right now, or

ever.”

Steve stared at him, eyes wide and pleading and conflicted. After a long moment, he lowered his outstretched hand, clenching it into a fist at his side like he needed it to keep the words back. His lips tightened, and he finally looked away from Billy, no longer meeting his eyes.

Billy huffed a laugh that had no trace of amusement in it. “That’s what I thought,” he said, pain and betrayal and confusion ripping through his heart. He shook his head. “You know what, Harrington? Fuck you.”

In one movement, he reached up to his neck, yanking the saint medallion off with a quick snap, the cheap metal immediately giving way for him. He tossed it in the other man’s direction, where it landed with a sad plink at his feet. He walked out the door without another word, leaving the takeout, and the man he’d thought he loved, behind him.

Max was used to being startled awake, but usually it was from the cell phone she kept right beside her head in bed. Being the second in a mafia came with its complications and expectations, and one of those was always being available for the things that Billy as head wasn’t. She intentionally set her ringer to the loudest volume possible any time she went to bed, so that she could be sure that it would wake her out of even her deepest sleep. Everyone knew to only call her at night if it was an actual emergency, or something that only she could handle that needed to be dealt with immediately.

This time though, she was awakened by the sound of the doorknob to her bedroom being turned, and although the sound of it was much quieter than a blaring ringtone, it woke her up more quickly and soundly than a fire alarm would. In a second, she was sitting up, snatching her pistol from under her pillow with the movement and pointing it at the person coming through before the door was even fully open.

“It’s me,” a familiar voice said, and Max blinked, recognizing Billy’s

voice at the same time she remembered that Billy had the key and must've let himself in that way.

"*Jesus*," Lucas breathed in the bed beside her even as Billy turned on the lamp beside her bed.

"We need to talk," Billy told her, eyes flicking over to Lucas but surprisingly not addressing the fact that they were clearly sleeping together – and had been *sleeping* together. It told Max that whatever Billy needed to talk about was serious.

Still, he'd stormed into her room without so much as a by-your-leave, so Max raised an eyebrow, glancing at the alarm clock on her nightstand before saying, "At midnight."

"Yeah, it's *kind of* time sensitive," Billy said irritably. "And it has to do with Harrington, so Sinclair? Scram." He snapped his fingers and pointed at the door behind him as though he would miss his message otherwise.

Max put a hand behind her without looking, grabbing Lucas' leg to keep him from leaving as she glared at her brother. "Lucas stays," she said firmly. "If it has to do with Harrington, then he's involved, anyway."

"Fine," Billy said, and it was his immediate acceptance more than anything else that told Max that he was *actually* stressed about something. "But at the very least, put some fucking clothes on – *both* of you."

Max rolled her eyes, leaning over the bed to grab her shirt off the floor where she had tossed it earlier, pulling it on before looking at Billy expectantly where he sat in the armchair beside the door. His elbows rested on his knees, fingers loosely intertwined while his lips twisted in equal parts thought and impatience.

"So, what's the big emergency?" she demanded, pulling her hair out through the collar of her shirt so it could fall freely down her back.

"We need to mobilize our crew – *all* of them," Billy told her. Max's eyes widened.

“Are they all going to be in the same place at once?” Max asked carefully, because – “The last time we did that...”

“Was Neil’s funeral, yeah,” Billy finished, waving his hand dismissively. “No, they’ll need to be divided into two locations. Each side needs to have equal manpower and abilities, but everyone needs to be ready to move Thursday night.”

“What’s on Thursday?” Max demanded. Wait, Billy had said this had to do with Harrington, so did that mean...?

“Harrington figured out the code,” Billy said shortly. “There’s going to be a huge shipment on Friday – we’re not sure of the time of day, but we narrowed it down to two locations they might be coming out of, and we don’t have the time to look into it further to be more careful; they might be gone by then.”

Max grabbed her phone off the nightstand, ready to make notes on how to divide and assign people, but then she paused, a thought occurring to her. “Are we planning to split Harrington’s people among ours, too?”

Billy’s jaw worked; Max realized a moment later that he was grinding his teeth. “No,” he said briskly. “We can’t depend on Harrington’s help for this.”

Lucas tensed behind her. “Why not?” he was the one to ask. “Our crews have been working together for months now anyway, we have the same goal...”

“Apparently not,” Billy snapped, cutting him off. “I only found out about this code by *accident* – Harrington had no intention of telling me anything about it.”

Max frowned, because she had thought that they were all on the same side here, but Harrington’s decisions seemed to suggest that he was working some other angle that he didn’t feel like telling anyone – including his own people, apparently, considering the fact that Lucas was just as confused as she was.

“Well, count me in on your plans, anyway,” Lucas said stubbornly,

and when Max turned back to look at him, she saw that a frown had overtaken his whole face. “I don’t know why he wouldn’t want to get involved when he’s the one to have figured it out, but that’s why I’m with your crew in the first place, is to stop the trafficking.”

“While your offer is appreciated, we don’t need to go starting a turf war,” Billy told him. “If it looks like I’m poaching Harrington’s people, that doesn’t look good any way you look at it.”

“If you really want to be involved, talk with your boss first,” Max agreed with Billy, while still placating Lucas, because she could see both points in their arguments. She looked back at Billy. “Are *you* okay? I don’t even remember the last time you didn’t call him by his first name.”

“I’m fine,” Billy told her shortly, a clear directive that he didn’t want to talk about it. “We’re over, it’s done – we need to move on to the whole reason we started anything to begin with. I need you to have assignments ready by tomorrow afternoon – we’ll gather people in the evening to explain to everyone else.”

Max nodded. “Alright,” she agreed, deciding to talk with Billy about whatever had gone down between him and Harrington later, because she could tell that Billy was hurting – but he was right, that these plans were time sensitive, so that talk would have to wait. “What locations are we looking at blitzing?”

Murray Bauman knew that his lover had secrets. He’d known it since first laying eyes on the man, but he’d thought at first that he was just another dirty cop in the Chicago PD. Murray didn’t judge – he himself was technically a dirty cop, being an informant for the German mafia as he was. But there was something about Alexei Utgoff that made him leery from the start.

When Alexei had been the one to blurt out on a case they’d been paired together on that he knew Murray worked for the Hargroves, he’d been certain he was a dead man. A moment later though Alexei mentioned that he was friends with one Steve Harrington – apparently the son of the current head of the Italian mafia. Murray

took it for the show of trust that it was; he was pretty sure he was the first person outside of the Italians who knew that John Harrington even *had* a son. Still, he had wondered if it was a calculated move meant to make Murray lower his guards, and he'd kept Alexei at arms' length despite the sad look he would sometimes get for it when the blond noticed.

After Alexei had taken a bullet to the gut for him, Murray had thrown away his suspicions with an ease that probably should have scared him. But it had been when Alexei had woken up in the hospital a week later that they had shared a kiss that cleared things up in Murray's brain. He frequently pondered over the intervening months whether he'd *actually* been suspicious of Alexei, or if he had intentionally come up with reasons not to trust him, because it was a good way of hiding a crush.

(It was rather amusing, he thought upon reflection. So often he could see when other people liked each other, or had thick sexual tension between them that had a wall of misunderstandings and assumptions between them that kept them apart. And yet, when Murray had the opportunity to start anything similar, he'd been so blind to it that it had literally taken the other man shoving himself in front of a bullet meant for him before he had that drop in his stomach, that sensation of – *Oh. I see now.*)

And Murray really did trust Alexei. That was why he didn't press, when Alexei would go silent randomly, and purse his lips like he was trying to avoid some particular topic. It was why he didn't search through his phone when he left it behind him as he left the room (cracking Alexei's passwords was as easy as cracking anyone else's) and why he didn't ask the pointed questions he might anyone else about certain gaps of time in his personal history. It was why he didn't call out Alexei when he would tell him little lies to keep up whatever façade he needed.

He knew enough to know that Alexei had a murky past, some sort of problems with his family that had sent him running to New York. He knew that he was beholden somehow to Steve Harrington, that they had come as a pair to Chicago years ago, that Harrington had been the one to get Alexei the job with the police department. But still with all of that, he had no doubt that Alexei cared for Murray more

than anyone else, and so he let the secrets slip to the side, because in the grand scheme of things he figured it didn't really matter.

And when Alexei figured out that Murray wasn't going to go digging for his secrets, he actually relaxed some, and stopped with the white lies to keep his past and present hidden. They came to a mutual understanding that they didn't tell lies to each other. They could avoid talking about something, even outright admit that something was a secret, but the lies stopped at the door. It made the relationship between them better on all sides.

But now...something was different.

Jane had been the one to call him, which was pretty par for the course. Murray knew that there was something personal at stake with the younger girl in stopping this whole trafficking business, was pretty sure he'd guessed what it was. But she had always been this quietly mysterious presence, but one he deeply respected because she always seemed a second away from being ready to fuck shit up. He liked the odd girl, and they had developed something of a mutual respect for each other in their communications.

She had sounded tense on the phone call, and Murray had discovered why when she told him that they were calling together most everyone in their crew that night to plan for a blitz of the businesses they had discovered were in charge of the human trafficking ring. Murray had promised to keep the police away and off their scent, because they *really* didn't need cops fucking this up so that the traffickers went free and buried their tracks further. And he knew that Harrington's crew was involved in bringing them down too, so he had made a comment about them before Jane had swiftly shut it down. Said something about Harrington not being involved, that he didn't agree with their plan, and that sounded strange to Murray because he knew that Harrington cared more than he let on – at least, if Alexei's opinion of him was to be believed.

But he didn't argue with Jane, because that wasn't relevant to his job here, and he had hung up and waited for Alexei to get back from lunch.

As soon as he was able to get Alexei alone, he had told him what

Jane had told him. This was normal for the two of them, sharing information from each side, and they had done so since before the Harrington-Hargrove alliance.

And Murray wasn't surprised that Alexei apparently already knew about his other boss' directions not to intervene, but he *was* surprised that Alexei apparently *agreed* with it.

"We don't even know everyone involved," Alexei said, voice pleading as the air grew tense between them. "We *think* that Brenner is in charge, but what if he is a red herring? I would hate to have everything get so much *worse* because we rushed in at the first sign of relevant information."

"Then when *are* we supposed to rush in?" Murray argued, folding his arms across his chest. "How many more kids have to be taken before we can act on it?"

"That is not what I mean," Alexei argued, Russian accent thickening in a way it always did when he got upset. "But this is the *first* actionable information we have come across – it would be foolish to risk spooking any multitude of others who might be involved that we haven't had the time to find yet."

"We *know* that there are more than a dozen kids about to be shipped off," Murray insisted.

"And there could be hundreds more that we would damn if we acted too soon," Alexei returned, voice rising. He stepped forward, taking Murray's face in his hands, and Murray resisted the urge to shove him away.

"I *know* you want to be the hero," Alexei told him seriously. "But just this once, please trust that Steven knows what he is doing."

Murray narrowed his eyes at his lover, brain turning over his words, but didn't say anything or resist against the kiss Alexei pressed to his lips. He didn't return it, because he didn't want the blond to think that he was okay with any of this, but he didn't push away from it, either. It was the most he could manage at the moment.

Alexei looked sad when he pulled back, dropping his hands from Murray's face. "I know the secrets are confusing," he admitted. "But I promise, it will all make sense soon. I just need you to trust me for a little bit longer."

Murray didn't say anything, but he nodded once in acknowledgement. Alexei opened his mouth, looking like he always did when he wanted to share one of his closely kept secrets, but just as he always did, closed his mouth without saying anything just a moment later. Tightening his lips, he turned and walked out of the bathroom, back to work.

Murray stood there for a moment, alone and thinking about Alexei's words. The problem wasn't that he distrusted Alexei – it was that he was leery again of Steve Harrington.

Coming to a decision, he left the bathroom, and clocked out of work just a little earlier than normal. Within the hour, he was back in his apartment, the one that technically didn't have Alexei on the lease, but his lover hadn't been to his own apartment in weeks and they basically shared this one now. He wanted to look at a few things before Alexei came home from work.

He supposed that now was the time that *he* would be the one keeping secrets from the man he loved. He hadn't ever thought that he would feel the need to take a turn in it.

He wasn't going to research and dig up Alexei's past, though. That would be going a step too far, and he knew that Alexei trusted him enough not to that he had shared just enough information that if Murray ever tried, he *could* find out everything about him down to what his least favorite vegetable as a child was. It was part of the reason Murray never had.

Previously, one Steve Harrington had been included in someone he didn't intensely research, as closely connected to Alexei's past as he apparently was. Murray hadn't had a problem with that before; even for how he had guessed that the Hargroves didn't trust the guy, he knew that Alexei did and that was enough for him. Alexei wasn't an idiot, so he trusted his judgment.

But now, despite Alexei's unwavering trust in the other man, Murray really needed to know about the mafia head's sudden reluctance to finish what he'd been so focused on for years. And he thought Steve Harrington's activities in New York would hold the first clue.

"I take it you didn't tell him."

Steve looked up at Tommy, sighing and rubbing a hand over his face. "I was going to."

Tommy's lips twisted a little, and he crossed his arms. "You were going to tell him before. Why not now?"

Steve leaned back in his chair, staring up at the ceiling unseeingly. "It was easier then."

"Nothing has changed."

"*Everything* has changed," Steve argued, and his voice was miserable enough that Tommy felt a pang of sympathy. It was enough that he figured he should stop arguing that particular point.

"The Germans are mobilizing," he said. "It looks like they're gathering tonight."

Steve waved a hand dismissively. "They're just meeting to plan," he said. "They won't descend until tomorrow at least."

"It will be too late by then," Tommy said. "We need to be prepared for a retaliation."

Steve shook his head stubbornly. "Billy isn't going to attack us." He pulled his saint's necklace out of the front pocket of his suit jacket, staring down at it, thumb rubbing over the engraved metal.

"Steve," Tommy protested with emphasis, coming closer to him with quick steps, "I'm sure he already thinks bad things about you because you kept the codes from him, and refused to get your own people involved. But *this* is so much worse. When he finds out, he might *kill* you."

“Billy’s not going to kill me,” Steve said strongly, clenching his hand around the medallion and looking up at his childhood friend with fire in his eyes. “He’s *not*.”

“Steve...”

“I need you to check on Mike and Lucas,” Steve cut him off, rising to his feet. His chair spun a little with the movement, but he ignored it as he walked around the desk. “They haven’t been in contact today, and I don’t want them caught up in everything.”

Tommy’s scowl deepened. “Yes, *Sir*,” he said sarcastically, giving him a mocking bow before leaving the room.

Steve rolled his eyes, because he didn’t have time for Tommy’s snark and arguments. Because as much as he didn’t believe that Billy was going to kill him when he found out, he did know the other man enough to know that he should expect at least some kind of personal retaliation. He needed to be prepared for that, and listening to Tommy’s worried complaints wasn’t going to help him at all.

Kali was used to sitting quietly, out of sight, waiting to see the first sign of movement so that she could react. Upon finding out that Harrington – whom she’d *thought* wasn’t that bad, but apparently she was wrong about that – wanted to hang back, wanted to not get involved in stopping *more* trafficking in his own damn city, she had immediately volunteered to surveil the first location on their list, which was a warehouse for medical supplies, apparently. Robin had said she would watch the other one. It’s not like they were needed within Harrington’s crew anymore; Kali had a strong feeling that their alliance was going to disintegrate within the next few days. She couldn’t feel sorry about it though, because by then their goal would be completed and the worst of the traffickers would be taken down.

She wasn’t naïve enough to think that this would stop all of the trafficking, whether in Brenner’s company or all over the world. But at the very least they would be saving another shipment of children from the horrendous lives they were headed toward, and this would cause a severe dent in operations for at least a while – long enough

for the information that Murray had ready to hand over to the feds to be used, for the locations outside of their reach to be raided and people inside dealt with, whether it was returning them to their families or taking them to prison. (Or death. Kali wouldn't mind if they were all killed.)

And for most of the night, things were quiet. She could see some movement from people she recognized as working with or for the Russians, and she remembered enough from her own past that she knew without a doubt that there were children in that building, waiting for movement. No food was being brought in by the time she got there, either – they were going to move soon.

It was just before dawn, as she was beginning to get sleepy in her position overlooking the warehouse that things changed – rather suddenly, and very drastically.

She watched in horror, unable to do anything as their plans went up in smoke.

The ringing of his cell phone was what woke Billy from a restless sleep. He opened his eyes, peering at the alarm clock that said it was just before six-thirty. He groaned, pondering for an instant letting his phone ring to voicemail, because he'd only been able to grab a couple of hours of sleep the night before and he knew that no matter who was on the other end, it would mean a start to the day that was *much* too early.

But he picked it up anyway, waking up much more quickly when he saw that it was Kali calling. He remembered that she had been on stakeout outside one of the warehouses, and the only reason she would have to call him directly would be if something had gone wrong.

Pressing to answer as he sat up, he held the phone to his ear.

“What's happened?” he said rapidly.

“They *raided* it!” Kali said on the other end, sounding a little distant

and a lot furious. “They just stormed the place a few minutes ago – they’re grabbing everyone involved and getting the kids out, there’s a whole bunch of vans and a fucking *bus*...!”

“Who?” Billy demanded, until he realized that there could only be one group of people busting the place, one group of people who knew exactly what they were looking for and when to make their movement before Billy’s crew could get in, and with more fury he hissed, “*Harrington?*”

“No – the *feds*!” Kali shouted. “The *fucking FBI* is swarming the whole area! And fucking Murray isn’t answering his phone – I’m *sure* he knew about this, the *fucker*!”

Billy was still processing this and its implications when his phone began vibrating with another call, and he looked down to see that it was Robin. He didn’t have the presence of mind to tell Kali to hold on for a moment; he just switched the call over to her.

“The FBI is swarming the place,” is what greeted her with, a question that wasn’t really a question.

“Yes – *fuck*!” Robin said, sounding just as angry as Kali had. “They hit at dawn, they came out of *nowhere*...!”

“Someone tipped them off,” Billy interrupted, voice dark. He had a good guess as to who that might have been, and felt fury rush through him anew at the thought. “Robin, get out of there *now*. Call Kali, both of you get back to base – we don’t need you compromised or caught up in all of this. Contact Max, let her know what’s going on and to halt all movement from our people.”

Billy hung up on both Robin and Kali, relying on Robin to get Kali caught up in his instructions. He went to the closet, yanking on some clothes and shoes before styling his hair into some semblance of order – just enough that he wouldn’t be obviously out of place as he walked the streets, because especially right now he didn’t need that kind of attention.

He got enough attention anyway as he made his way across town, over several blocks to a hotel he’d been in countless times by now.

His expression was enough to be noticed even without the way he stalked along the sidewalk with a clear mission and destination in mind.

Harrington's security let him through, apparently not knowing that there was anything strange at this point with him showing up to the familiar room. They probably thought he was there for another hookup.

Not fucking likely, he thought darkly as he waited for the elevator to rise to the needed floor. Still, the assumption served his purposes at least as he made his way unimpeded to Harrington's door.

The door was unlocked, which days ago might have had him scolding the other man for his lack of security, but now he just shoved it open, storming into the room.

Harrington was fully dressed and ready for the day, sitting at his desk, but the chair was turned toward the door. It seemed almost like he'd been waiting for Billy to show up, and his expression was already resigned when his eyes met Billy's across the room.

Without pause, Billy stormed over, grabbing Harrington by the lapels of his jacket and forcing him out of the chair, using the momentum to propel him across the room so that his back was shoved against the opposite wall, holding him up by his fists.

"*Why?*" Billy growled, inches from Steve's face, taking in the brown eyes he had loved so much before his betrayal. He didn't give Steve time to answer, pulling him away from the wall about an inch or so just so that he could throw him against it again, keeping his fists clenched tightly in the expensive fabric of his jacket. "*Why* would you tell the feds? Why would you *betray* us like that?"

He didn't know whether the "us" he was talking about was Billy and his crew, or if it was the relationship he had ended with Steve not forty-eight hours before, but it didn't really matter; the point was still the same.

Steve didn't fight back against the grip that held him in place. Rather than smug or dismissive or any of the other expressions Billy

would've expected his eyes to hold though, he just looked *sad*. It was enough to make Billy's grip slacken, confused and hurting and just wanting things to *make sense*.

"Billy," Steve said, his voice breaking just slightly. His hands reached up to cover Billy's, just for a moment, and it made Billy yank his hands away like they'd been burned, taking a single step back.

"Why would you trust *the FBI* more than you trust *me*?" Billy asked him, unable to hide the pleading, hurt tone in his voice as he looked at the other man.

"Billy," Steve said again, voice regretful. "I thought – well, I thought you would figure it out yourself."

As he spoke, he moved over slightly, reaching for the table beside them – the one with the secret drawer Billy had discovered weeks before. He grabbed the empty wallet Billy had passed by before in favor of the papers with codes and pictures of missing children. The wallet had been moved so that it was sitting on top of the table rather than in the back of the hidden drawer where it had been before.

Steve opened the wallet, and held it out to him, and Billy stared down at the inside – which wasn't empty, after all. It wasn't a wallet, either.

He looked away from the golden badge, from the identification card next to it, up at Steve's face. Steve gave him a heartbreaking smile and shrugged slightly, and then said what Billy now knew. "I *am* FBI."

Notes for the Chapter:

HA.

I honestly thought someone was going to end up guessing this by now, but I guess I only thought I was being obvious because I knew what was coming.

Originally I had it that Steve's saint's medallion was going to be Saint Michael, but I thought that might

give it away for any Catholics out there or just other people who know the saints. (I'll be honest, I don't because I am not Catholic - but I don't really know how prevalent they are elsewhere and googled a bunch before settling on Anthony.)

ANYWAY. I'll add the tags now that Steve is FBI and what fic inspired this one haha. I hope people were surprised. :) Next chapter will explain more about how Steve got here.

8. Chapter 8

Notes for the Chapter:

We're almost done! Just one more chapter after this one!

Eleven Years Ago

"I'm going to apply to the FBI Academy."

Steve paused in the process of lifting his sandwich to his mouth, looking over at Jonathan at the sudden words. He blinked, turning them over in his head, wondering at Jonathan's decision and whether he was serious.

"Seriously?" he asked skeptically. "Why?"

Jonathan gnawed on his bottom lip, swiping one of his fries absently through his puddle of ketchup. "I dunno, I just – feel like it's the right thing to do? I want to help people."

"Okay," Steve said slowly, "So why are you nervous like I'm going to jump down your throat for this?" He finally took the bite from his sandwich, chewing as he evaluated his friend.

Jonathan shrugged, not looking at him. "I mean, you've gone on long-winded rants about cops before and how much you hate them. I don't know how you feel about federal agents."

Steve raised an eyebrow, taking a sip from the straw of his soda. "I hate *bad* cops," he corrected. "And a fed isn't a cop."

"I mean, they sort of are," Jonathan disagreed, finally putting the ketchup-soaked fry in his mouth, causing Steve to grimace at the imagined taste. "And like, I don't judge you for your – you know – *mafia* history..."

"Not sure I like where this is going," Steve cut in dryly.

"...But I figure you probably don't have that great of experience with

any kind of law enforcement,” Jonathan finished with a helpless sort of shrug.

Steve narrowed his eyes at the other man, falling back into learned training instinctively to figure out what Jonathan was thinking. It had only been a little over a year since he'd left Chicago after all, and old habits die hard and all that. He swept his gaze up and down Jonathan's form sitting across from him at the picnic table, taking in the way Jonathan was still keeping his gaze focused on his food, at the way he tapped the fingers of his free hand against his knee under the table, at the sucked in cheek that said Jonathan was chewing on it. All of it added together to tell him that Jonathan wasn't telling the whole truth, was waiting to see if Steve believed his explanation but didn't want to give anything away with his gaze, because he already knew that Steve could tell a lie based on someone's eyes. Clearly he didn't realize that he had other tells that Steve could easily pick up on even without the eye contact.

Steve set his half-eaten sandwich down on the paper it had been wrapped in, and dusted the flour from the bread off of his hands. Acting nonchalant, he reached out to grab his cup again, but didn't drink from it, just swirling it absently in one hand.

“You're keeping something from me, Johnny,” he practically sang.

Jonathan frowned, finally looking up at him. “Don't call me that,” he grumbled, stabbing another fry into his ketchup.

“Tell me what you're keeping back,” Steve retorted, staring at him unblinkingly.

Jonathan blew out a sigh. “It's not *bad*,” he said, and then continued at Steve's insistent stare. “It's just – you remember when you told me about that time you'd gotten lost in German territory as a kid, and the undercover agent found you and helped you back to one of your family's hotels?”

“Yeah,” Steve snorted. “The guy saw an in to see behind the curtain with my dad's business.” The only thing that had saved him from a harsh thrashing for bringing an FBI agent literally to his doorstep had been his mother's interference. “What does that have to do with

anything?”

“I just...” Jonathan sighed again. “I want to help someone like that – *genuinely*, not with the ulterior motive that that guy had.”

“Volunteer at a soup kitchen if you want to help someone,” Steve retorted, sucking furiously at his straw. “Why would you decide that becoming a *fed* was the best way to go?”

“Because of you,” Jonathan said, much too calmly in Steve’s opinion. Steve gaped stared, and Jonathan continued, “From what I understand, you were the heir to one of the most powerful mafias in Chicago. Even without the mafia attachment, you had businesses that you would be the head of; you would be rich, never wanting for anything.”

“All that glitters is not gold,” Steve mumbled, staring down at the pattern on the paper his sandwich had been wrapped in.

Jonathan gestured at him, as though Steve had just proved his point. “You had all that, and you got out. You just want to be good, have a normal life, you know? And so I figure – there’s got to be other people like that, too. People who would be good if they were given the chance. And maybe, being in the FBI, I could be closer to the ground with that kind of thing – I wouldn’t be one of those people who just wants to get an assignment done, or reap the benefits of working for the government, or who joined for the power trip that it gives them. Because I know *you*, I could look for more people just caught with a shitty hand. Help *them*.”

“You’re saying it’s *my* fault you want to be a fed?” Steve demanded.

Jonathan blew out a tired breath. “Maybe the reason, but you’re not at *fault* in the way you’re thinking,” he said. “Look, I can’t even apply yet anyway – I would have to have a degree to become an agent. But I figured I’d just tell you, that’s what I’m going to do.”

Jonathan returned to his food, and Steve followed suit, but his mind was whirling, still stuck on the conversation. He wasn’t as opposed to the idea as he put off, still stuck in the feeling that he needed to show how much he hated law enforcement from growing up the way he

had. But still, it was a little startling, and not something he would have expected of Jonathan. He had always thought of cops and feds as these macho man's men – cocky, arrogant assholes who wanted to hurt minorities and people in trouble just for the power kick it gave them. He had admittedly been softening in that regard as he'd met other people at NYU who wanted to go into law enforcement, or were dating ones who were, but still he had never pegged *Jonathan* as someone who would be interested in that.

Jonathan was...gentle, Steve decided. Naïve, almost, with how he saw the world through rose-tinted lenses. He was majoring in *Photography*, for God's sake. He was unassuming, quiet, and treated Nancy like a queen. He wasn't at all someone Steve would picture as someone he would've hated just two years previous.

They didn't talk about it again, but Steve went through the rest of that semester thinking on Jonathan's words. Slowly, he discovered that despite his expectations, he didn't...*hate* the idea. And as much as he fought against it, because hell he was an *Art* student, it started to sound like a more appealing option for Steve, too.

It was his second Christmas break since leaving Chicago that he approached Jonathan, decided.

"So," he said, like this meant nothing, "You think the FBI would hire me, too?"

Jonathan grinned.

The next semester of school had one Steve Harrington joining the Criminal Justice program, and his new life's course was set.

Eight Years Ago

"Probie – my office!"

Steve looked up at his boss' call down into the bullpen, before glancing at Jonathan, uncertain which probie Hopper was talking about. He hadn't done anything wrong, so far as he knew, so he didn't think he was the one being called to, but he was new here so

he didn't know how things worked fully yet and couldn't be certain.

Hopper heaved a sigh into the air, realizing the same thing his new agents had, and clarified, "*Harrington* – get up here," before turning to go into his office, taking a drink from the mug of his newly poured coffee.

Steve scrambled to his feet, knocking over the cup of pens on his desk in the process and making Barb, his FBI trainer, snort from the desk next to him.

"Smooth," she teased, and he glared half-heartedly at her, vowing to throw his rubber band ball at her when he got back. For now, he didn't have time.

He smoothed his hand over his tie as he walked across the room toward the stairs, nervous despite himself for what Hopper might want to talk about. He'd been working in the New York office for three months now, and he hadn't been called in before – not alone, anyway. He didn't like being singled out as different or *other*, and while he was sure this was a totally normal meeting, he couldn't help feeling like he'd been called out in front of the class or something.

He schooled his expression into one of calmness though, because he was good at that – had been since he was young, because he'd had to learn very quickly not to let on what he was feeling. It had certainly helped in his training at the Academy.

He knocked on the open door's frame, despite the fact that it had been less than a minute since he'd been told to come, but it just felt polite.

"Come in, Agent, close the door behind you," Hopper directed, not glancing away from his computer screen as he typed on his keyboard. Steve obeyed, and then sat in one of the chairs in front of Hopper's desk, fighting the urge to fidget.

He didn't have to wait long for Hopper to finish whatever it was he was doing on the computer before the older man turned his attention completely to Steve.

"You're being transferred," he told him, and Steve's eyes went wide.

"Did I do something?" he scrambled to think of what he could've possibly done wrong. "I thought I was doing fine here; I'm working with Jonathan – er, Agent Byers – on that case with Hertzels..."

"You did nothing wrong," Hopper raised his voice a little, interrupting before Steve could continue rambling. "Christ, stop worrying, this isn't a punishment – it's an assignment."

"But I *have* my assignments..." Steve started, and Hopper cut him off again.

"This one is more important," he said. "At least, it is for you in particular. The transfer isn't going to happen immediately – the Chicago office wants you to be a full-fledged agent, out of your probationary period before you start on this assignment."

Steve froze. "Chicago," he repeated the one part of Hopper's statement that stuck out. "You're transferring me...to *Chicago*?" Hopper nodded once, and Steve shook his head in response, a little desperately. "Don't you know my – history there?"

Hopper nodded again, saying, "That's why they wanted you specifically. You'll be better suited for the job."

"But..." Steve flexed his fingers, opening and closing them in fists like he was fighting the urge to strangle something. "I don't think you *get it* – I step foot in Chicago, people will know – my father will *find out* – I'll be killed!"

Hopper looked wholly unimpressed with Steve's panicking. "We have a plan, one we're pretty sure will work. We've already set the wheels rolling when you went into the Academy so no one could find out what you were doing; we're just going to use those plans now. Anyone looking up on you will see you majored in Art, and we have the usual procedures for people with a past – it will look like you're working minimum wage jobs in the meantime."

"It doesn't matter if it looks like I'm living a shitty life and not actually a part of the FBI," Steve said knowledgeably. "I haven't talked

with my old man in *six years*. You don't just *leave* the mafia – I show up like nothing is wrong and it would be the equivalent of spitting in his face. He would *have* to retaliate.”

“That’s why you won’t be showing up like nothing is wrong,” Hopper explained patiently. “We want to send you in directly to him – we need you to be *within* the mafia, because that’s where it looks like our problem sits. You need that in, that edge that other agents just don’t have.”

“How am I *supposed* to just walk in like nothing is wrong, though?” Steve asked, desperately trying to find a hole to poke that would let him widen it enough to climb out of this *awful* situation he could see blooming. “I doubt most of my father’s men would listen to me at all anymore, and that’s even *if* my old man is feeling generous enough to let me live.”

Hopper leaned back in his chair, already looking satisfied, like he knew that he’d already ensnared Steve’s commitment to the case. Which, Steve supposed, he kind of had, because one didn’t have too much autonomy as a government agent, and refusing this case so early on in his probationary period would not look good to the higher-ups, no matter the circumstances.

“We want you to go in, regretful to how horribly your life will have appeared to have gone apart from them,” Hopper explained, clasping his hands over his stomach. “Are you familiar with the parable of the prodigal son?”

“It’s fucked up,” Nancy swore when Steve told her at dinner that night. She chopped the celery harder and more deliberate, the clacking noises of the knife against the cutting board echoing through the apartment’s kitchen.

“They shouldn’t be *using* you like this,” she continued furiously, sweeping the celery into the pot on the stove before yanking over a couple of carrots to chop those. “You joined the FBI to do good, not just go back to how you were before, now with their oversight.”

Steve sighed, avoiding the knife as he snatched up a carrot coin to pop into his mouth, swinging his legs so they thudded lightly against the cabinets underneath the counter he sat on. “It’s not *all* bad,” he reasoned, trying to convince himself as well as her. “I’ll have Jonathan as my contact, anyway. Hopper figured it made the most sense, since we actually *did* know each other in college, so if anyone finds out about him I can explain it away more easily.”

“I don’t like this, either,” Jonathan said from the other counter, where he was peeling potatoes. “It’s like they didn’t even wait too long after you graduated the Academy before they slammed this on you – it makes me suspicious at just how long they were waiting to be able to use you. And the fact that Chicago specifically requested this route?” He shook his head, letting them mentally fill in the gaps on their own.

Steve decided that he didn’t really like those gaps being filled, his heart beginning to race and something heavy dropping in his gut – he realized a moment later that what he felt wasn’t just anxiety – it was *betrayal*.

“Do you think that’s the *real* reason I was accepted into the FBI?” he fretted. “What if I’m not even a good agent – what if they just needed my family name to get an in with the mafia?”

“That might be why you were *accepted*, but you passed qualifications on your own,” Nancy said strictly, leaving no room for argument. “You’re a *good agent*, Steve – don’t you dare doubt that.”

“And look at it this way,” Jonathan suggested, “Your first undercover case, you’ll be the keystone in bringing down a human trafficking ring. That will look *great* on your resume.”

“Assuming my father doesn’t just *off* me when I show up,” Steve retorted, kicking his foot once against the cabinet, hard enough for the bang to echo. “Hopper said I shouldn’t send any warning – he just wants me to show up out of the blue, because then he can be sure everything is secured on this end beforehand so I’m not just walking into a trap.”

Jonathan hummed. “Sounds more like the FBI just wants to keep

some illusion of control here,” he supposed.

“*Right?*” Steve emphasized in full-hearted agreement, throwing his hands up in the air. “It’s not like this is my *life* we’re talking about here or anything!”

“Well, you have two options here then,” Nancy said, throwing the carrots into the pot with the rest of the vegetables. She set the cutting board back down on the counter and then turned to look at him directly, planting her hands on her hips. “You work for the next three years or so, train up like they want you to and graduate from probationary agent to full-fledged agent. You take this assignment, move to Chicago, and hope that your father doesn’t decide to make an example of you and kill you right off the bat. You live there sort-of undercover for however long is needed to figure out who is responsible for this trafficking ring, and you come out victorious as having completed this major case as your first one, make your resume look good.”

“Or?” Steve prodded, raising an eyebrow.

“Or, you tell the FBI to pound sand, you care more about your life than the longevity of your job. You take the risk that you’ll be let go, or given a boring desk job and develop scoliosis from filling out forms all day. But you might meet someone that way still, and you can live out a content life like you wanted when you *left* Chicago, without all of this spies and secret agent drama.”

“You make both options sound so appealing,” Steve said dryly. He sighed. “I think we all know which option I’m going to choose.”

Nancy sighed, turning to grab the potatoes from Jonathan to chop. “Yes,” she said in resignation. “I suppose we do.”

Seven Years Ago

One thing that Steve loved about New York City was the anonymity. In Chicago, it had been almost impossible to go out in public and not have at least one person recognize him – or at the very least, think that he looked eerily familiar, enough that he was stared at as they

attempted to place where they might know him from.

But with a population of over eight million people, New York City was almost three times the size of Chicago and didn't carry the Harrington history with it through the generations. He could go out and be comfortable in the anonymity that the sea of black provided him. He was just another businessman.

Which is why it was all the more alarming one day when he realized he was being followed.

At first, he'd thought that he was just being paranoid. He was sure that if he mentioned it to Jonathan or even Barb or Hopper, they would point out that he was a probie, that he was still getting used to his job, and that always provided for a certain amount of needless paranoia as they got used to their new identity and responsibilities. It was apparently common in new agents.

But as the days passed on, and he found himself continuing to look over his shoulder, he grew more and more certain of it. He wasn't sure who it was that was following him, especially as the cases he was currently working on weren't all that big. And the sea of black that he'd taken comfort in for years now had turned into a sea for his pursuer to get lost in, too.

The thing was, the eyes on him didn't feel malicious, exactly. He didn't know how to explain that, but whoever was following him seemed more curious than anything else. Watchful. This was supported by the fact that as days rolled into weeks, whoever was following him didn't do anything, apparently content to observe from a distance.

And it was frustrating, honestly. Steve had learned as a child how to shake pursuers, and how to identify them. He'd learned further these methods in the Academy, and he would consider himself proficient at it. And yet every time he thought he might have a clue as to who it might be, the one he had his eye on turned to talk to someone else or turned to go through the front door of some storefront, apparently not the one following him after all.

Steve didn't tell even Jonathan though, mostly because he knew it

would cause the other man to worry. After all, Steve had no real proof that the one trailing him had no malicious intent. And, Steve had been away from Chicago for quite a while. He could have lost that instinctive training without realizing it, and was now falling back on hopeful wishes more than anything concrete.

It came to a head about two weeks later.

Steve had gone to pick up sandwiches for lunch; he had the orders of several people on a paper in his pocket, because as soon as people found out someone was going on a food or coffee run there were always people putting in their own orders. Steve didn't mind; he did the same thing when he had to work in the office on some assignment and couldn't go out for some food or drink that he craved. What goes around comes around, and all that. Also, it made Steve feel more like he was a part of the group, not any better or lesser than anyone else in that office. It was like a constant reminder that despite his assignment for the future, he was a part of something and not just in charge of people who were too scared to tell him no.

Upon his return to the office though, a dozen sandwiches and assorted pastries in the large bag at his side, he received a pointed look from Barb before she flicked her eyes toward Hopper's office.

Abandoning the idea of settling at his desk with his pastrami and blueberry scone for the remainder of his lunch break, Steve sighed and left his food at his desk before going to see what Hopper wanted.

"You have a walk-in," was what Hopper greeted him with. He jerked his head a little, directing Steve to come around the other side of the desk to look at the computer screen, which he turned slightly so that Steve could see it better. He found that the older man had the security feed to the interrogation rooms up on his screen, and sitting at the tables was a man perhaps a couple years older than Steve himself, with short curly blond hair and old fashioned eye glasses.

"Do you recognize him?" Hopper asked.

Steve shook his head in denial, staring at the screen. "No," he responded. "Who is he?"

“Well, he recognizes you,” Hopper said with an air of finality, pulling the screen back into its previous position and not answering Steve’s question. “We haven’t admitted to anything of course, but he came in asking for a Special Agent Steven Harrington. He claims he knew you in Chicago, not personally but by reputation.”

Steve’s gaze snapped over to meet his boss’. “What, is he trying to *blackmail* me or something? What the hell does he want?”

“He won’t say,” Hopper said, looking frustrated. “Just keeps saying that he won’t say anything until he can talk to ‘Special Agent Steven Harrington’. By the way, how is your Russian?”

Steve blinked. “I mean, I chose it as my foreign language option in college, but I wouldn’t consider myself fluent. Why?”

“It looks like it’s his first language, and combined with the name I would guess that he’s ethnically Russian. If he really did know of you in Chicago, it may be some sort of connection with the Russian mafia,” Hopper explained. “Would that cause any problems?”

Steve thought about it for a moment, before deciding, “I don’t think so? We never had problems with the Russians before, but Hopper, it’s literally been seven years – and things can change *very* quickly. I don’t know where they stand right now.”

“Hm,” Hopper said, leaning back in his chair, clasping his hands over his stomach and evaluating Steve as he stood before him. “Look, we can throw this guy out on his rear, claim ignorance here and keep your cover intact. You don’t have to go talk to him.”

“But that wouldn’t give us answers,” Steve sighed. “And it could very well make things worse if he *is* a hostile and decides to go spread rumors. Nah, I’ll talk with him, figure out what he wants.”

“I’ll watch from the observation room,” Hopper told him.

Steve smiled a little. “I would expect nothing less.”

Steve opened the door to the interrogation room, and the blond man

immediately looked up. If there was any doubt that this man knew Steve personally, it vanished when his expression lit up with recognition, and he sat up hopefully.

“Signore,” he greeted before Steve could say anything, his Russian accent slipping through his words. “It is good to finally meet you.”

Steve returned his words with a simple nod, walking forward and pulling out the chair on the other side of the table before sitting down, clasping his hands casually in front of him on the table, his elbows resting on the edge.

“I am Alexei Utgoff,” the man said clearly, apparently knowing that this meeting was being recorded and enunciating his words likewise. “I think that we can help each other.”

“I’m told you’re familiar with my family,” Steve said, prodding him for more information and not acknowledging his previous words.

“Da,” Alexei nodded. “I grew up in Chicago. I remember you when you were a child.”

Steve didn’t allow the frown that he wanted to make to cross his face, keeping his expression placid and giving nothing away. “How could you have known me as a child? You’re hardly older than I am.”

“I was a child, too,” Alexei dismissed this as unimportant. “I would tell you more right now, but I am afraid of being trapped in my words. If I were to promise to help you, could you promise me immunity for past actions in return?”

This time, Steve allowed himself to frown. “You have given me nothing that would promise that the information that you have would be deserving of immunity,” he told him.

“It concerns your current case,” Alexei tilted his head. “Well, your future case. The one that will take you back to Chicago.”

“How the hell do you know about that?” Steve demanded. “Not even my whole team here knows about that.”

“I cannot say more without a promise of immunity,” Alexei insisted.

"I can wait for it in writing if that is what you prefer, but I know that among the families your oath is your bond, so that would be enough for me."

"Is your story going to include that you killed someone?" Steve checked.

"No," Alexei said firmly. That was enough for Steve – and hopefully enough for the higher-ups.

"Fine," he accepted, figuring that he could do his best to convince the higher-ups to grant Alexei limited immunity, and if it didn't work out then that wasn't his problem. "I will do all I can to get you at least limited immunity for what you tell me in this room, right now. If anything comes to light later, that does not fall under this offer for protection from the law."

Alexei nodded, recognizing the limits to Steve's powers here and accepting of them.

"I think a lot will be cleared up by telling you that my mother was Natalia Antonova," he said simply.

Steve leaned back in his chair, surprised but not showing it in his expression. "You're a bastard heir," he realized.

Alexei dipped his head once in a nod. "My father raised me after my mother died when I was a child. I have two older brothers – I'm sure you know of them."

"Anton and Mikhail," Steve remembered. "Anton is the first heir."

"I was always more liked than my half-brothers were," Alexei explained, running his finger in absentminded patterns against the metal table between them. "They were always best friends; even though Anton was to be the official head of the family, they always knew that they would be running it together. It made them arrogant. They didn't like that their people liked me more though, their younger bastard brother. They sent people to kill me; I faked my death and ran to New York instead."

"Okay, sad story," Steve said dismissively. "But not exactly unique,

among mafias. How are you expecting to be able to help on this case that I may or may not be working on?"

"I have been looking into problems within mafias since I left years ago," Alexei said, leaning forward a little. "Things just don't seem to be quite right, but I have had a hard time figuring out exactly *which* families are working together. But I know my brothers, and I know that they are somehow involved in this trafficking business that the FBI is looking into."

"So, where do you come in?" Steve prodded.

Alexei spread his hands a little. "I can be an asset, here while you prepare, because I do still have some ties back to Chicago and even some here in New York. I can be your 'in' in Chicago, when you go back. Another ally in your mission. You understand?"

Steve leaned back in his chair, quiet as he evaluated Alexei. He heard what the Russian wasn't saying; Alexei wanted back in with the Russians, wanted to take down his brothers not just because of their involvement in the trafficking business, but also so that he could go back to his family, his mafia. He wanted Steve's help in getting that position back, in the coup of taking over.

What Steve couldn't decide was whether Alexei was more concerned with stopping the trafficking, or about getting his leadership position over the Russians. If it was the latter, then it didn't necessarily mean that he should refuse his offer, but it did mean that Alexei would be more open to a better offer. It meant that Steve couldn't fully trust the man with what he knew.

"What have you been up to, in your time living in New York?" he finally asked, mind churning with ideas, discarding some and tentatively considering others.

"Information gathering," Alexei responded promptly. He spread his hands a little. "And hiding. Any relations between the New York Russians and the Chicago Russians would mean that anyone could find out about me. I have stayed out of immediate family activities, you see?" Steve dipped his head in an understanding nod. "But I do still have...friends, shall we say, in these different organizations.

Ways of keeping up to date.”

“In addition to hacking into federal servers,” Steve added dryly.

Alexei gave him a beatific smile. “Of course,” he confirmed, the promise of immunity allowing him to answer in the affirmative. “I must keep informed of what *all* sides are doing.”

Steve hummed. “Alright,” he finally said. “I’ll say for now that I’m open to your offer, but it’s going to come with some stipulations. With my boss’ approval, you can be my informant for the time being. If all goes well, we can see what to do about Chicago. Sound good to you?”

Alexei grinned and nodded. Steve just hoped that his offer sounded good to Hopper, too.

Five and a Half Years Ago

“It’s looking like it will come together better than I had expected,” Steve said to Nancy as he squeezed frosting out of the bag, onto the sugar cookies in front of him. He frowned a little at the wobbly line he’d created with the green frosting, but Nancy had said the Christmas cookies didn’t have to be pretty because they were just going to eat them anyway, so he moved on to the next cookie despite his lack of faith in his own abilities.

“No, I think those are worse than Jonathan’s attempts,” Nancy teased, peering over at the cookies from where she stood at the table, cutting out more shapes from the rolled-out dough.

Steve scowled at her playfully. “I was *talking* about the case.”

Nancy laughed, switching out her star cookie cutter for one shaped like a candy cane. “You just make it so *easy*, Steve.”

Steve sighed, putting down the frosting bag in favor of just grabbing the cookie and taking a huge bite out of it. “I only have about a year before I’ll be transferred,” he said, grimacing a little at the crumbs that he spewed out as he spoke through a full mouth. “Hopper said I need to meet the agent in charge in Chicago in the next few weeks.”

“That should be fun,” Nancy offered. “Hope he’s not a dick.”

“I’m honestly not holding out much hope,” Steve admitted. “He’s the one who asked that I come out and take up my role with the Italian family to stop these guys. I still don’t know how much he really knows about me, or how long he’s been watching me.”

“What’s his name?” Nancy asked, laying out the shaped cookie dough carefully on the baking sheets. “I want to stalk him on Facebook.”

“Peter Ballard,” Steve said, squeezing out more frosting haphazardly onto the cookie, because he liked the frosting more and the cookie was just an easy transporter for what he actually wanted. “Although considering he’s FBI, there’s not going to be anything useful on there.”

“I don’t need useful, I need *interesting*,” Nancy said staunchly, brushing her hands together briskly to get rid of excess flour before pulling her phone from her back pocket. In moments she was standing next to him at the counter, leaned over with her elbows on it, scrolling through the profile of the one she’d determined was the guy they were looking for.

“He’s not bad looking,” she hummed, taking a bite from one of Steve’s terrible-looking cookies.

“You’re not supposed to have an opinion on that; you’re *married*,” Steve said expressively. She bumped her hip against his in retaliation to the teasing.

“I can look and not touch,” she said haughtily, and paused in her scrolling for a moment as something apparently caught her eye. “His listed job is at a *mental hospital*. I mean, I guess no one would think he’s FBI that way, but *still*. It’s weird.”

“Least it’s not Starbucks, or McDonald’s, or Walmart, or whatever other job the FBI says I’m doing right now,” Steve said with a shrug.

Nancy hummed. “He doesn’t have any family pictures, though. He just comes off as kind of self-absorbed? Like, you can see shadows of other people behind the camera, but he’s the only one ever in these

pictures.”

“I mean, it’s good for safety,” Steve offered. “Only reason I got out of it is for the sake of the prodigal son story we’re concocting.”

“For how self-absorbed he’s supposed to appear, there should be more shirtless and/or gym pictures,” Nancy decided. Then she seemed to notice for the first time how much frosting Steve was eating, and she swatted him in the arm. “Stop eating that! You need to save some for Jon and Will.”

Before Steve could retort, they heard the squeak of the front door opening, and Nancy perked up immediately.

“Honey, we’re Facebook stalking Steve’s new boss!” she called. “Come judge him with us.”

“That doesn’t bode well,” Jonathan said as he walked in, his younger brother following behind him. Despite his words, he went to wrap his arms around her waist, hooking his chin over her shoulder to look at the screen with his wife.

“I feel like as the resident gays, we would be a better judge of his appearance,” Steve said to Will, sidling over to him. Will snorted in agreement, setting his bag down on the ground next to the counter.

“How is school going?” Steve asked, grabbing the plate of poorly frosted cookies from where they sat next to his elbow, holding them out in offering to the younger man. Will was studying at the University of Illinois to be a doctor; Steve had always been impressed with how smart the guy was, but the fact that he was barely twenty and was about to finish his bachelor’s degree was nothing short of amazing.

“Not bad,” Will said with a shrug, accepting one of the cookies and nibbling on one corner of it. “How’s the prep for your huge case going?”

“With Nancy checking up on everything, what could go wrong?” Steve said dryly, and Nancy scoffed but didn’t say anything in protest, continuing her own investigations into Ballard.

After a few more minutes of chatting, Nancy seemed to finally realize that Steve and Will were eating all the cookies, and she forced herself away from her phone, chasing them out of the kitchen to leave her alone to make the rest of them with Jonathan. The two of them just laughed and migrated over to the table, snatching bits of raw dough instead.

Steve showed up at Nancy and Jonathan's apartment several times over the next few days, not exactly having family to spend Christmas with instead but content in the family he'd adopted for himself. He certainly hadn't expected this, when he'd fled Chicago years before, but being with Nancy and Jonathan and Will and even Barb, who'd hit it off with Nancy immediately upon meeting her – they made him feel like a part of something greater than a mafia family. He was also very aware that this was more than likely the last Christmas that they would be able to celebrate together before he would be going to Chicago for who knew how long, and he wanted to savor their company for as long as he could before then.

It was the day after Christmas when Steve showed up at the apartment again, and he noticed that Will was acting weird. He'd always been watchful, but he seemed to be glancing over at him with a almost nervous and contemplative look more often. But it wasn't like he used to act when he'd first met Steve, when he had a crush on him (Steve was *very* thankful that the crush had passed and they could be friends now, if not brothers). He wasn't sure what had changed since he'd seen him the day before, but it didn't seem *bad* exactly, so he decided to leave it up to Will if and when he wanted to share his thoughts.

It turned out, Will *did* want to share his thoughts, just not with Nancy or Jonathan there, apparently. It was the next day, the twenty-seventh, when the married couple had gone to grab some things from the grocery store that Will sat next to him on the couch while Steve was catching up on some paperwork from the office.

"Steve?" Will said, sounding a bit tentative, and Steve hummed for him to go on without looking up from his screen. "I was – thinking about what you said to Jonathan, how you're going to be...isolated, in Chicago."

Steve glanced up briefly at the younger man, before looking back to his screen. "I mean, it's part of the job. It wasn't exactly a complaint."

Will nodded a couple of times. "I know, I just...I was thinking about it, and I don't really want you to feel alone, and you'll have a *lot* of people around you who won't like you or even want to kill you..."

"Yeah, I'm pretty aware of that part," Steve snorted humorously, but he set his laptop aside, because this seemed like it was going to become a serious conversation, whatever was eating away at Will's mind.

"Right," Will nodded again, fidgeting with a small hole in the knee of his jeans, pulling on the threads to make it wider. "And I know you're familiar with Chicago, and with a lot of the people you'll have to deal with. But, I was thinking – maybe I could take some time off after graduating, delay med school a bit."

Steve didn't need to hear any more than that. He could put the pieces together himself, with Will's trepidation, the words he *did* say as well as the ones he didn't. But he didn't like the picture that those pieces created.

"You want to join the mafia," he said flatly.

Will nodded earnestly. "To help you!" he insisted. "Not because I think the mafia is the good guys, or anything like that."

"Oh, well thank *God* it's not that," Steve said sarcastically, and rubbed a hand down his face before looking at Will again. "You do *not* want to get involved with these people – you would never be able to get out, do you understand that? I mean, look at *me*."

"But you shouldn't have to be alone out there!" Will maintained, eyes wide and pleading. "I know you'll have your bosses and people you report to, but what about *friends*?"

"Will, it is exactly *because* you're my friend that I don't want you there," Steve said evenly. "You all think because I'm the son of the head of the family that I have a lot of say, that I'm practically untouchable, and maybe once that would've been the case but not

now. I would never forgive myself if you got hurt or killed because you were caught up in all this bullshit.”

“I just want to be able to help you,” Will said, voice quiet as he inspected the now bigger hole in his jeans.

Steve blew out a breath. On a selfish level, he wanted to accept Will’s offer. It *would* be nice to have someone like a brother there with him when he needed it, and he wouldn’t have to sneak around so much to keep him secret. But he knew that he couldn’t allow any of his found family to be caught up in everything. It was already bad enough that he would have Jonathan as his regular contact, and he would be halfway across the country. He didn’t want anyone in the *vicinity* of Chicago that he really cared about. He couldn’t risk someone hurting or killing them because of their connection to Steve.

“Finish school,” Steve advised, grabbing his laptop again to signal the end of the conversation. “Go to med school. You don’t need to be getting caught up in all of this.” At the look on Will’s face, Steve made an attempt at logic instead. “Besides, you don’t even know Italian – it would be impossible to work for them.”

Will subsided, and the conversation ended there.

But Will remembered his words, and took them as a challenge. A year later, before Steve left, Will asked again to help Steve from within the mafia – but this time they carried out their conversation in fluid Italian. Steve still didn’t like it, but when he talked about it with Jonathan, his friend said that if Will wanted to help him with this that he should let him. Steve had been surprised with Jonathan’s easy attitude on the matter, but he no longer had any recourse for a denial. A year after *that*, with his history newly fabricated, he joined the Italians under the name Will Myers.

Five Years Ago

Steve stared at the folder he held in his hands. It was thick, full of information accumulated over the last several months as Steve worked to get himself caught up in as much as he could to complete his case. Special Agent Ballard had sent over his most recent report

earlier that day. Most of it was suppositions, or missing persons reports, or even just some of the background information Steve had requested about who was running each family nowadays.

Jonathan had left Steve's apartment just a few minutes ago, with an admonition not to stay up too late with his planning.

But Steve wasn't planning. He was just...overwhelmed, honestly. With about six months to go before he went back to Chicago, he was catching up to the reality of his situation, of just what he would be walking into soon.

Nancy had been one of the first people he'd met, when he moved to New York. She had said several times over the years that the person he was then and the one he was now was a stark difference, that he was better and kinder now. But he worried, sometimes, or actually a lot, that he was only becoming good because he had been around Nancy and then Jonathan and all the rest of his friends-made-family that had followed. He worried that going back, living that lifestyle he'd been a part of his whole life growing up in Chicago, would turn him into a man like his father. A man he hated.

John Harrington wasn't actually a bad father, all told. He had his rules, and he expected Steve to follow them, and when Steve fell short of that he received the punishment he deserved. Sure, maybe sometimes it was a little too harsh – (although a voice sounding suspiciously like Nancy told him mentally that *black and blue does not constitute 'a little' harsh; that's abuse*) – but Steve had always known what was expected of him growing up.

But although he wasn't a *bad* father, he was by no means a good one, either. Steve had realized by now that John had only had a kid because it was the thing to do not only for someone of his "station", but because he needed to groom someone to take over the family business upon his death. Thus, John had never cared for him more than one would expect of a distant blood relation; hadn't encouraged Steve to do what *Steve* wanted, hadn't kept promises about father-son outings or anything of the like.

But that wasn't why Steve hated him. No, Steve hated John because he was a horrible person, a control freak who couldn't handle even

the mere *idea* of things not going his way. So, when John had found out that Steve had developed a crush on one of his security – a twenty-year-old at the time named Evan – John had gotten rid of the man. Steve was still uncertain whether he had actually killed him or just had him deported back to Canada, but in the end it didn't matter. It had been a clear signal of what Steve could expect going forward any time he strayed from the path John had set.

He had fled to New York six months later.

Shaking his head to rid himself of the memories, Steve tossed the folder to the side. The papers spilled out at the movement, but he didn't go to pick them up, just staring at Alexei's file sitting on top. At least the Russian knew just how much Steve dreaded going back to Chicago by now. Alexei even understood, to some extent.

He rose to his feet, walking over to the freezer to pull out the bottle of vodka that Alexei had gifted him for his birthday a couple of weeks before. He poured a generous helping into his glass before pausing, and then setting the glass aside and just swigging directly from the bottle.

Hopefully not *everyone* in the Chicago crew would be as horrible as his father was.

Four and a Half Years Ago

Steve stared up at the opulent hotel. It wasn't as old as the usual ones his father favored, maybe built in the seventies rather than the twenties, but it still had that Roaring Twenties style, with the yellow-brown brick and the shining chandeliers being the lobby's source of light. It was exactly the style Steve would expect from his father, the head of the Italian mafia. He had always liked showing off his opulence, he recalled. It had always made Steve uncomfortable, like he was sitting a tier above everyone else.

It was hard to get a reservation at this hotel, he remembered. It always seemed to have only one or two rooms available – they would always be snatched up within a few minutes of it becoming clear. John Harrington had only ever kept it up enough that it wasn't so

suspicious that it was nigh impossible to rent a room there for even a night. The rest of the rooms were used for various parts of the Harrington operation, whether it was actual business being done or where some of his employees lived. It had only increased the demand for the rooms, as people were drawn by the allure of mystery surrounding it. It lived up to the expectations, with its grand ballroom and other state of the art facilities. People who worked there never wanted to leave their jobs; there never seemed to be any openings, either. Steve knew also that those people who worked there, pretending to be a part of the cleaning staff or the cooks or even the receptionist – they were all part of the Harrington crew, there for the pleasure as well as security of the mafia boss. It was an expensive place wrapped in secrecy.

He didn't need a reservation, though. He wasn't staying the night.

He wished that there was some way out of this, but the path had already been set. He mentally cursed everyone he knew for a moment, up to and including Jim Hopper himself for having the audacity to be his boss, to agree to this assignment – and then he had to curse himself, just to be fair, for even thinking to accept this assignment in the first place. The very thought of seeing his father again sent waves of revulsion through him so strong that he wanted to throw up; he actually had, in the airport on his way here, when the reality of what he was doing caught up to him. He hated the thought of who he was expected to become for the foreseeable future – he had left this life behind for a reason, years ago.

But he knew that this assignment was bigger than Steve; Steve was just a cog in the machine, one facet that would hopefully be able to get reliable intel and proof they needed to bring the FBI in to stop one of the fastest-rising human trafficking rings in America. Steve could deal with the constant nausea and stomach aches if it meant that he could help the hundreds of people being used and abused by people who thought that they had the right to just because they were rich and in a position of power.

Blowing out a breath, knowing that someone must have been watching him standing there for the past couple of minutes, he decided to stop stalling and make his way inside. He didn't bother glancing at the obvious security camera in front of the door; he knew

there were a dozen other hidden ones watching him as he stood there. But waiting wasn't going to change anything; he may as well get this over with. If he was going to die today, so be it.

Several minutes later, he stood in front of his father, with his former best friend and the accumulated security standing all around the room. They all watched him, no doubt suspicious and wondering if Steve might attack the elder Harrington, but Steve wouldn't. That wouldn't be conducive to finishing the mission that had been set out for him.

Those blue eyes were just watching him, waiting, expectant, and Steve should have expected that, because the mafia boss was good at that, at waiting him out until he dug his own hole, but still he was a little surprised. It really had been a long time.

But he knew that he needed to say something, to be the one to break the silence, because he knew that look in his dad's eyes, and it was easy after all to fall into his old role as he said, "Dad." His voice broke a little, and he didn't clear his throat because that would be admitting to weakness and that was not the Harrington way, so he just firmed his voice and said the words he needed to, the ones he needed to say to finagle his way back into the family business to accomplish the goal he'd been assigned to, the words his father needed to hear before anything else: "I'm sorry."

The senior Harrington regarded Steve with a blank expression for only a moment more, before his face creased into a smile – relief and satisfaction and smug superiority there in equal measure. He was the one to meet Steve halfway, returning his words with a hug, arms around his shoulders. It felt cold, distant – not the hug of a father welcoming his son home, but one of a leader welcoming his subservient worker back into the fold. It was a reminder of Steve's deceit, of how he needed to fake submissive regret for who knew how long so that he could get to the information he needed and get the hell out of dodge, get back to New York where he'd made a new family of his own with the friends he'd made from school and in the FBI.

"You are forgiven, son," John told him, the first words Steve had heard from him in eight years, and his heart galloped with

nervousness as much as dislike for the man who called himself father in his chest as he reluctantly returned the hug, faking relief as a prodigal son *should*. “Welcome home.”

9. Chapter 9

Notes for the Chapter:

Apologies for the incredibly long wait on this last chapter - I always have a hard time wrapping up a story. But, yay! All is well!

The sun was high in the sky by the time Steve was finished explaining the large chunks of his story. They had each gravitated to a seat as time went on, Steve half-sitting, half-leaning against his desk while Billy sat in the armchair next to the door, watching him carefully as Steve spoke.

Steve told Billy about joining the FBI, about his assignment soon after to come back undercover, about how the human trafficking case had ground to a halt years ago as they had received no new leads, everyone in Chicago stonewalling the agents who went around searching. Steve told him how after he had come back, how he had managed to glean small clues along the way, during the “probationary period” that John had set for him to test his newfound loyalty to the family again. He told Billy how he had worked with Alexei over the years, how he had first been his CI and then his friend, his ally in taking down the traffickers. He explained how he had come upon what they now knew was planted information from Gorgon that led to his suspicions toward the Germans, a way of diverting the attention and how much it had worked. He admitted that he had told Ballard to go ask Billy about his businesses and how they connected to Steve’s family, to see if it could spook him into letting something slip when Steve planned to meet with him soon after.

“Of course, my father’s death wasn’t really in the plans,” Steve admitted with a small shrug, looking down at his hands, held in front of him with interlaced fingers. “And neither was my becoming head of the family. Hopper – my boss – wanted to pull the plug on it completely; I convinced him to let me stay and see out the mission. There were enough people within my family who knew about me already, so disappearing would’ve just spooked a lot of people anyway.”

Steve fell silent then, and after a moment of listening to the clock on the wall ticking, he looked over at Billy to see if he could figure out what the man was thinking.

Billy's expression was smooth, calm but for the stormy look in his eyes, the one Steve knew by now meant that he was thinking very long and hard about what he'd just learned. Beyond that however, Steve couldn't figure out if Billy was angry with him or how he might react. He waited though, because he at least owed Billy that much.

Finally, Billy spoke. "You were going to tell me. You *tried* to tell me. With the necklace, after Gorgon. Why?"

Steve was honestly surprised that that was the first question the blond had asked. It took him a moment to respond. "I didn't know Tommy would be the one to go find it. I didn't...I mean, I've known him since I was a kid, but I didn't think he would take it too well, so I never planned for him to know. But...I trusted you. I *trust* you."

Billy's frown deepened at Steve's declaration of trust, not looking like he believed it. He didn't address it though, and said, "Why didn't you say anything after that? Once you knew I didn't know. Or when I was here last, and I specifically *asked* you why you were holding back?"

Steve's mouth twisted a little, and he ran a hand over it as he considered his words. Then he dropped his hand and said honestly, "I got scared. You had just...I thought things were clear, and then they weren't. And I didn't want anything to change. I thought I could...pretend."

Billy clearly didn't have any idea what Steve meant by the words he didn't say. For the first time, anger began to appear on his face, no longer hidden under a blankly curious façade.

"So you decided to pretend you returned my feelings?" he bit out angrily. "I didn't realize that the FBI did honeypot missions."

Steve's eyes widened at his words, and he put his hands up like he was motioning him to stop. "No, no," he insisted. "That's definitely CIA. I lied about a lot, Billy, but I wouldn't fake loving you. It was different when it was just sex – I mean, I had a crush on you, to be

sure, even for how much I tried to deny it – but the only outright lies I told were about what I was doing in New York.” He subsided at the somewhat stunned look on Billy’s face, not sure how the other man was going to take his confession, and he said more quietly, “I understand that you don’t want anything to do with me anymore, but I *swear* I never meant to hurt you. I mean, I made sure that Ballard would be dropping in before you and your crew were supposed to storm the place just so that none of you would be caught up in all those arrests, so I think if nothing else...”

Steve was cut off abruptly when Billy got to his feet, walking quickly and deliberately over to where Steve sat in his own chair. He sat up straighter, expecting a punch or a threat or something when Billy grabbed him by the front of his shirt and yanked him to his feet –

But a moment later Billy’s lips were crushed to his own, stubble scratching at Steve’s smoother skin, and Steve wasn’t about to look a gift horse in the mouth, so it took barely a moment before he was returning the kiss in kind. His hands clutched at Billy’s waist, pulling him impossibly closer and ignoring the hard press of the gun at his hip in favor of pouring every emotion he could manage into the kiss, not sure whether or not this would be their last one.

Several long moments later, Billy pulled away from the kiss – just his face, though, as he kept his hands clutched to the front of Steve’s shirt.

“I can’t believe you broke the law for me, you damned idiot,” Billy breathed out, but he didn’t look upset at this realization.

“Well,” Steve started, “Technically, I didn’t. There’s a lot of leeway for undercover agents, and the job was just to catch the human traffickers. The fact that I told my boss that I had discovered new information, and they needed to storm the place earlier than expected – well, who will ever know that that wasn’t strictly true? Who will ever know that I did it just to protect you? The FBI isn’t after the German mafia specifically, so...”

Billy puffed out a laugh and shook his head, pressing a much quicker kiss to Steve’s lips to shut him up again. “Phrase it however you want,” he said amusedly. “You definitely used the feds to suit your

own needs.”

“Well, I’m kind of in love with you, so I wasn’t about to let you get arrested,” Steve said seriously, but still with a little smile. Now that it was clear that all was not lost or destroyed between the two of them, he relaxed more, and could be a bit more open with the other man.

Billy’s face softened at Steve’s outright confession, and the hands clutching Steve’s shirt went to wrap around his shoulders instead, pulling them closer together.

“I love you, too,” he said quietly, and a moment later they were kissing again.

Some indeterminate amount of time later, Billy played with the necklace around his neck that Steve had returned to him, the saint’s medallion that meant so much more even now. They could hear the sound of the city outside the hotel window, but it played a quiet background noise to their afterglow and didn’t bother them.

Billy was lying half on top of Steve, and the other man’s arm must have been at least half numb by then, but Steve hadn’t complained and Billy didn’t really feel like moving. He had some kind of feeling, at least – enough that he could absently play with Billy’s curly hair.

“Did you ever actually work at Starbucks?” Billy asked out of the blue, breaking the quiet in his curiosity.

Steve snorted in amusement at the very idea. “No. That was just for anyone who went looking into my background. Considering the circumstances, we figured it would look better if I was a spoiled heir discovering what the real world is like and not liking it, and thus my return back to Chicago.” He tilted his head to look at Billy. “Why do you ask?”

“I’m just imagining you working in customer service,” Billy smirked at the mental image. “How many idiots would it take before you just go full postal?”

“Hey, I would absolutely keep my cool,” Steve protested, laughing as

he pushed himself to sit up in the bed, but not moving away from Billy. "I'm a trained federal agent, no Karens could break me."

"Federal agent', I don't know what it will take to get used to that," Billy huffed a disbelieving laugh, shaking his head. "How on earth did you fake being a mafia boss for a year?"

"Well, the trick is that I *didn't* fake it. I really was a mafia boss – I was raised in this, so I know how to do it. I really did work for the betterment of the families, and Chicago, as though I *was* just a mafia leader. I just happened to be working with the FBI at the same time." He looked down, rubbing his thumb over Billy's knuckles. "I didn't used to like this...whole world. I thought everyone was in it for selfish gains, so I didn't really want to consider being a part of it all again, making decisions and choices about who lived and died. I didn't want to be like my father."

"You're not," Billy assured him. "I never cared for John; any idiot could see that you're very different from him."

Steve smiled at him. "I know," he said simply. "I know that *now*. You helped me that."

Billy blinked. "I did? How?"

Steve's smile grew. "Back when we first met up in the pizza parlor. It would make sense for you to be so worried about Jane being hurt, because she's your bodyguard and clearly you would be closer to her than your average security. But then you were asking everyone else about injuries, caring more about your peoples' wellbeing than the alliance. Someone heartless wouldn't have bothered, especially in front of an unknown. And *then* you're talking about your doctor being on *maternity leave*. A lot of legitimate businesses don't have that, but you knew your people and your temps by name, and..." He shrugged, like this all made sense, like Billy wasn't reeling a bit at being psychoanalyzed so easily about something that he hadn't even really thought of.

"It was at that point that I started *really* hoping you weren't involved with the human trafficking," Steve finished. "Because I wanted to know more about a boss who would care so much about his people

that he didn't care how it looked to another family."

"Well, damn, Steve," Billy huffed a bit, pushing himself up in the bed to pull Steve back into a kiss, one that he hoped conveyed his feelings better than words would, because he didn't really know what to say to all of that.

They lost themselves a bit then, and another hour later they finally got out of bed to get a shower. Billy didn't really want to break the mood of everything, but his worries were growing louder in his head, needing to be resolved so plans could be made.

"Hey," Billy finally said as Steve pulled back from turning the shower head on, waiting for it to warm enough for them to get in. Billy fidgeted with the medallion around his neck for a moment. "Where do we go from here? I'm still the head of my family, and...you're a fed."

Steve gnawed on his bottom lip briefly, before reaching out to take Billy's hand away from the medallion, holding it instead. "I don't know," he said honestly.

Billy didn't like that answer. "We still need to make plans," he said, mind racing ahead. "Make sure no war starts over all this. And no one else can find out you're a federal agent, or we could have a mutiny on our hands. On your side or on mine. And we need to figure out *how* to tell our families and the alliances we've made that it's been taken care of, but in such a way that we're not implicated in the fallout of everything. And when..."

"Hey," Steve interrupted, squeezing Billy's hand to draw his attention back to him. "I don't know. But we will deal with it, I *promise* we will. And we'll deal with it *together*."

"How is this going to work?" Billy murmured, staring in Steve's expressive eyes.

"I don't know," Steve said again. "But, *God*, do I want to try. Isn't that enough for now?"

"Yeah," Billy agreed quietly, smiling at the man he loved. "It is."

Notes for the Chapter:

The rest can be left up to your imagination, but suffice it to say that they lived happily ever after. :)

Author's Note:

Drop me some encouragement - it's what I live off of.
;)

Thanks for reading!